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ABSTRACT

Using data from the 10th grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning, researchers selected 26 high schools across the state of Washington that had made greater gains in school improvement than other schools serving similar populations of students. Interviews were held with the principals of these schools and with 13 comparison schools that had not made such gains. Data also came from five site visits to talk to teachers and students. Findings suggest that the differences between improving and comparison high schools are less stark than the differences discovered at elementary and middle school levels in other studies. Many of the improving and comparison schools went beyond just test preparation to begin to adjust their programs to match the new state standards and tests. All of the schools reviewed their curricula, and nearly all reported that they increased their focus on improving students' reading and writing skills. Some schools began offering after-school support programs. Improving schools were, however, more focused in their approach, more determined to succeed, and more active in engaging students and teachers in making standards work. The majority of improving schools capitalized on new standards and tests to focus adult efforts to improve student learning. Improving schools that did not focus on the state standards and tests, but used them as targets within an existing strategy of improvement made slightly greater gains in achievement than other improving schools. Findings suggest that making the fundamental changes that affect student learning requires new ways of working by teachers, students, principals, parents, and communities. Three appendixes discuss research methods, present interview and survey protocols, and review the steps taken by most schools to respond to state standards. (Contains 29 references.) (SLD)

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Making Standards Meaningful

High School Reform Efforts in Washington State

Sara Taggart
with Mary Beth Celio

October 2001

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center on reinventing public education

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Executive Summary

This report marks the third year of exploration by the Center on Reinventing Public Education into the way fast-improving schools in Washington State work. In our first two reports, Making Standards Work (1998) and Making Standards Stick (2000), we reported that elementary and middle schools can make a difference in raising student achievement in the state's new standards-based system. This year, we turned our attention to high schools. Using data from the tenth grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), we selected and interviewed principals from 26 high schools across the state that made greater gains than other schools serving similar populations of students. To provide a point of reference, we also interviewed 13 "comparison" school principals and conducted five site visits to talk to teachers and students about their schools.

Our findings suggest that the differences between improving and comparison high schools are less stark than those we discovered at the elementary and middle school levels. We learned that many schools in our sample, improving and comparison alike, went beyond just "test preparation" to begin to adjust their programs to match the new state standards and tests. Every school reviewed their curriculum and instruction to make sure that students will be exposed to the material and teaching methods that they will encounter on the tenth grade WASL. Nearly all schools (92%), as well, report that they have increased their focus on improving students' reading and writing skills, for instance by training all teachers in "reading across the curriculum" or by requiring students to do more writing in all classes, not just English or History. A small number of schools went a step farther to identify students who struggle in the core areas tested on the WASL, and began providing additional support through after-school programs or computer-assisted instruction.

Nevertheless, while on the surface many improving and comparison schools appear to be taking similar paths to improvement, improving schools stand out in several important ways. They are, on the whole, more focused in their approach, more determined to succeed, and more actively engaging students and teachers in the challenge of making standards work. These differences are manifested in the following ways. Improving schools:

- Pick a strategy for raising student achievement and stick to it despite the challenges and distractions they face.
- Embrace the new state expectations and WASL as positive tools for bringing about changes in their curricula, instruction and programs.
- Make new expectations for students count by building them into the existing structure of grades and course credits.
- Get in touch with individual students by creating smaller learning communities and tapping into students' opinions about their schools.
- Take responsibility for gaps in student learning by pressing teachers to examine shortcomings in student achievement and keeping up the pressure to improve, even when their districts and communities seem satisfied with their efforts.

Improving schools took one of three tacks to accomplish their goals. We identified a very small group of schools (only 2) that focused primarily on preparing students for the test itself. The majority of improving schools (14 schools) capitalized on the new standards and tests as a mechanism to focus adult efforts to improve student learning in more lasting ways. They emphasized the importance of the test, but at the same

time began to make more lasting changes to their curriculum, teaching methods, expectations of students and teachers, and their relationships with students.

One-third of the improving schools (8 schools) in our sample took a slightly different approach. They focused predominantly on efforts identified in research as "best practices" used by effective high schools across the country (e.g. creating smaller learning communities or increasing the rigor of instruction for all students). These schools did not ignore the advent of the state standards and tests, but included them as targets within an existing strategy to improve. Our data show that these schools made slightly greater gains in student achievement than other improving schools that focused primarily on the standards and tests. More inquiry is needed to confirm the impact of these schools' approaches, however, as the number of schools involved was very small. (The remaining two improving schools in our sample were excluded from this portion of our analysis due to incomplete information.)

While the news from high schools is promising, the challenges that many schools face are even more daunting than those reported by elementary and middle schools. Principals in improving and comparison high schools agree that there are four main challenges they must overcome in order to make deeper and more lasting changes in their schools. They must:

1. Motivate students to take the WASL and learning seriously.
2. Leverage teacher energy and skills to improve their schools.
3. Close the significant gaps in some students' learning in a short period of time.
4. Move forward in an environment of uncertainty about the future of school accountability in Washington State.

While many improving schools made a strong start in addressing these challenges, most schools' success in raising the level of achievement of all students is far from assured. Numerous principals and teachers question their capacity to ensure all students a realistic chance of passing all four sections of the WASL and thus becoming eligible for a Certificate of Mastery (currently envisioned as a requirement for graduation starting with the class of 2008). For some, it is a matter of finding adequate time and energy to get the job done. For others, it is more a matter of increasing teachers' and communities' commitment to change. Some schools are counting on the advent of the Certificate of Mastery to boost student, parent and community motivation to improve, but many, too, acknowledge that motivation alone will not be enough to close the significant gaps in learning that some students bring to school. Some high schools are looking to state and local leaders to help them access new ideas on how to close those gaps, but at the same time admit that some staff members are unlikely to adopt those new strategies until the consequences of not doing so are made more clear.

Our findings are consistent with prior research on the progress and challenges of bringing about lasting improvements in high schools and student achievement. Experiences in states across the country suggest most large-scale reform efforts fail to affect more than a small number of teachers and schools. Making more fundamental changes that affect student learning in most high schools will require new ways of working by teachers, students, principals, parents and communities. State and local actors can help schools go beyond surface level

changes to make standards meaningful by keeping up the pressure to improve, while also providing new incentives and opportunities for high schools to reshape the way teachers, schools and communities engage students in challenging learning experiences.

Introduction

Since the 1993 adoption of House Bill 1209, education and policy leaders in Washington State have focused on the development of new standards for what students should know and be able to do before they graduate from high school. The intention of the standards-based reform effort is to raise student achievement by setting clear learning targets for students, judging whether or not those targets are being hit, and then holding schools accountable to remedy the situation when students are not succeeding.

As the state moves into its ninth year of efforts, the emphasis shifts from developing a set of learning standards and tests, known respectively as the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), toward the question of how schools and students will be held accountable for student achievement in the four areas (reading, writing, math and listening) identified thus far as "essential."

At no level is this question more salient than in high schools. Under current legislation, students in the graduating class of 2008 who pass all four sections of the tenth grade WASL will receive a Certificate of Mastery and will then be eligible for graduation. Those students who do not pass will not be eligible to graduate until they do. Beyond that, however, state accountability plans are not clear, and recent proposals to push back or abolish the Certificate of Mastery have increased the cloud of doubt about the future. Nonetheless, most high schools anticipate that their successes and failures will be measured in new ways in the coming years.

The reality is, however, that in the first year of testing at the tenth grade level, only 21.9% of students statewide passed all four sections of the WASL and would have been eligible to graduate under current plans. This snapshot of what students know and can do in the tenth grade suggests that there is room for improvement in high schools across the state, no matter how the state ultimately defines its accountability plan.

The good news is that, in the first two years of testing, some high schools made strong gains in reading and math; stronger in fact than schools serving similar populations of students. Why is that so? Is there anything different about these schools that can explain their "fast-improving" nature? What can local, district and state leaders learn from these schools' approaches? Whether or not standards and testing actually lead to lasting increases in student achievement depends at least in part on how high schools respond to the challenges they face in making necessary changes in their organization, attitudes and strategies.

The purpose of this study is to explore how some "fast-improving" high schools think and act. While on the surface these schools are not radically different from other schools serving similar populations, their approaches offer some valuable lessons for school leaders looking to boost student achievement and school success. They also highlight ways in which policymakers can create an environment conducive to rapid, yet meaningful, improvements in learning and test scores. Finally, the experiences of these schools provide the public with a more clear understanding of what it is going to take to ensure that all students reach a high level of achievement before they graduate from high school.

This report builds on two prior studies conducted by the University of Washington and Partnership for Learning. Those studies, Making Standards Work and Making Standards Stick, identified the strategies

of fast-improving elementary and middle schools in Washington State. This report is presented in three parts. Part I provides the backdrop for making standards meaningful in high schools in Washington State, giving a summary of school reform in the state and offering a review of the literature on the challenges and strategies for promoting high student achievement. In this part, we also discuss our study methodology and sample of schools. Part II summarizes our findings. Part III discusses the implications of our findings in light of the uncertain future of "high stakes" reform in Washington State and offers some recommendations for how local, district and state leaders might use the information provided to help every high school student reach his/her fullest potential.

Part One: Background

School reform in Washington State

Over the past eight years, Washington State has developed a set of Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and the accompanying Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in reading, writing, math and listening. Students at the fourth grade began testing in spring 1997, with seventh grade tests added in 1998. Tenth graders took the tests for the first time in 1999.

Under current legislation, the graduating class of 2008 will be the first to experience "high stakes" standards and tests. Students who meet standard on the tenth grade WASL in reading, writing, math and listening will receive a Certificate of Mastery and will be eligible for graduation.[1] Meeting standard on the science portion of the WASL will become a graduation requirement in 2010.

At the time of this report, the state has yet to confirm its plans for how it will use the test data derived from the WASL to hold schools accountable for increasing student achievement. Two proposals debated in the most recent legislative session differed in the amount of time, resources, and flexibility that struggling schools would be given to demonstrate greater gains on the WASL. Despite a great deal of debate, the legislature failed to adopt measures from either the House or Senate packages.[2] At the same time, they shelved proposals to postpone or abolish the official start of the Certificate of Mastery.[3]

In the meantime, the state has moved forward in its articulation of other expectations for high school students. The Washington State Board of Education passed a resolution requiring all graduates of public schools to complete a "Culminating Project" that demonstrates their academic achievements and progress as related to the state's essential learning goals. Additionally, students will need to complete a "High School + Education Plan" that outlines goals for their high school experience and for the first year after they graduate. Embedded within these new requirements is an expectation that high schools introduce students to a "career pathway" in order to sharpen their thinking about their options for the future.[4]

Whether or not these and other new expectations for students and schools will lead to long-term increases in student learning remains to be seen. The availability of two years of data from the tenth grade WASL presents an important opportunity to examine how schools are trying to increase student achievement in the new standards-based environment. According to the test data, over the two-year period some high schools made greater gains on the WASL than schools serving similar populations of students. As the pressure mounts for high schools to achieve significant improvements in student learning, it is helpful to understand the strategies used by these "fast-improving" schools.

Characteristics of "effective" high schools

As we look more carefully at the strategies of high schools in Washington State, it is helpful to understand what research tells us more generally about high achieving schools.

A U.S. Department of Education analysis of the available research on school quality identifies three elements most clearly related to student learning: teachers, classrooms and school context. The report contends that

"school quality is enhanced when teachers have high academic skills, teach in the field in which they are trained, have more than a few years of experience, and participate in high quality induction and professional development."[5] It also cites evidence that students learn more in classrooms that engage students in rigorous academic work. According to the study, there is some evidence that some students (particularly those who are less advantaged or from a minority racial group) benefit when classes are small. Finally, the analysis finds good evidence for the hypothesis that the way schools are organized and run affects how much students learn.

Numerous studies have identified characteristics and strategies of "effective schools."[6] These schools have a sense of mission around which they organize their efforts; they press students to achieve at higher levels than other schools serving similar populations; and they cultivate a professional community where teachers collaborate regularly to ensure students' academic and personal success.

More recently, there has also grown a body of evidence on the value of smaller learning communities at the high school level. Traditionally, large comprehensive high schools try to meet the needs of all students by providing "something for everyone." According to some researchers, however, individual students in these schools can fail to get the adult attention and support that they need to succeed. Some research on small schools suggests that these environments may create better opportunities for students to connect with each other, with adults, and with the material they are studying, thereby reducing the anonymity associated with large, impersonal schools.[7]

There is still a great deal to be learned about how schools can be more effective in a standards-based environment. Partnership for Learning and the University of Washington explored this issue in two previous studies, Making Standards Work and Making Standards Stick. These reports outlined strategies that elementary and middle level schools used to make better than expected gains on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in grades 4 and 7.

Findings from those reports emphasize how improving elementary and middle level schools acted as if their expectations for student learning mattered. They focused on a small number of school-wide goals, targeted their resources to achieve those goals, identified and supported struggling students, and involved parents and community members in their efforts. Schools that succeeded in sustaining their gains were relentless in their emphasis on increasing student learning as a goal above all else.

Challenges associated with realizing change

While researchers do not agree on any single set of factors that uniformly influence student achievement, many agree that high schools are complicated institutions that resist change.[8] High schools face multiple barriers that can impede their progress in attempting to bring about needed changes.

High schools are traditionally organized in a hierarchical and compartmentalized way. Teachers are typically clustered in discipline-based departments, and frequently only know and regularly talk to others who teach the same subject or grade level. In many cases, schools' daily schedules provide teachers with few opportunities for the kind of cross-grade or cross-discipline

collaboration that characterizes effective organizations in other professional arenas. Teachers' training further reinforces these distinctions as new teachers craft their area of expertise and learn to respect each other 's domain.

Furthermore, high schools are especially bound by external expectations, in particular to preserve those traditions that parents and community leaders hold dear. Schools are expected to be the same as they have always been, if only to preserve adults ' memories of what school was like in the past. In some cases, students adopt these hallowed traditions as their own (e.g. a winning tradition in sports), making them even more difficult for school leaders to challenge. Finally, students in high schools are more sophisticated than their elementary and middle school peers. While many students acknowledge they would work harder if someone asked them to do so, they also admit that they often question the value of what adults are asking them to do.[9] This makes high schools dynamic places where students can more directly influence the outcome of adult initiatives to affect change.

Methodology

In this study, we sought to understand what fast-improving high schools are doing to achieve dramatic gains in student learning on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Given prior research on elementary and middle schools, we wanted to know if high schools employed similar strategies, or if the challenges they faced were so distinct that they relied on different approaches to increase their scores over the two-year period.

Using data from the 1999 and 2000 WASL, we used the following indicators to identify a pool of high schools that "beat their demographics:"

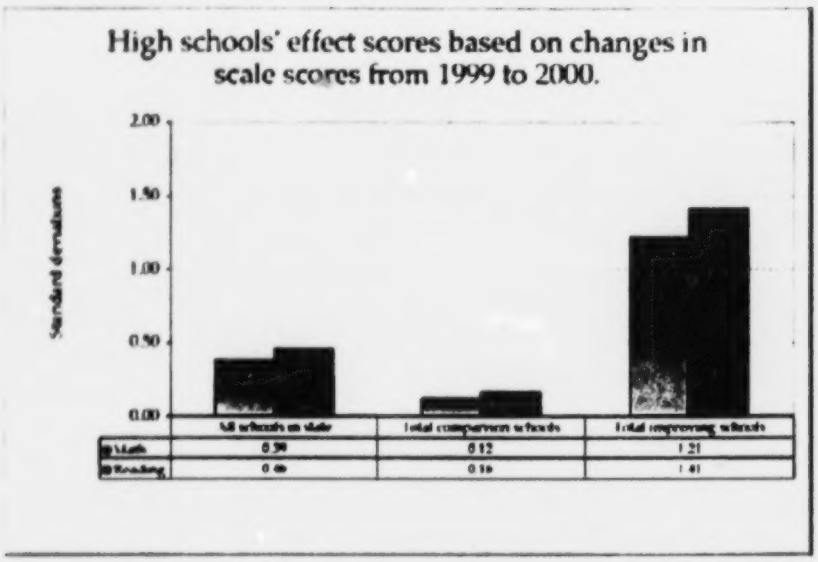
- Percent change in proportion of students meeting benchmarks in reading and math
- Percent change in the average reading and math scale scores[10] of students at each school
- Effect size[11] between a school's year 1 and year 2 mean test scores

The percent change in proportion meeting standards was used because these proportions are the results most often reported by the media. Scale scores from each school were used because they more accurately reflect the increase in achievement of students who made gains but did not reach the state benchmarks. Finally, effect sizes were used to standardize all scores, independent of the first year 's scores. As a result of this approach, we are confident that the schools we identified made significantly greater gains over the two-year period than other schools with similar student populations.

From the schools that made significant gains, we selected a sample of 30 schools, all of which tested at least 50 students each year. Included in the sample were schools serving students from predominantly middle to high socio-economic backgrounds, as well as schools with largely poor and/or minority populations. Where possible, we attempted to include schools from each region of the state, serving a variety of student populations in urban, suburban and rural settings. Next, we identified 16 "comparison" schools with similar locations and student characteristics as our "fast-improving" schools. Comparison schools made small or no gains on the WASL over the two-year period. For a more

Figure 1.

Tenth grade math and reading scales rose more in improving schools than in other schools across the state.



complete description of our sample and methods, see Appendix A.

Figure 1 uses our sample schools ' effect scores (the change in average scale scores standardized using a pooled standard deviation) to illustrate how improving schools made significantly greater gains than the comparison schools (and all high schools across the state) in reading and math scores over the two-year span.

Of the 46 principals invited to participate in the study, 39 completed a 30-45 minute telephone interview with us, and 37 of those completed a 17-page questionnaire about their schools. We also conducted 5 follow-up site visits to talk with teachers and students about their school 's strategies for improvement and their perspectives on the state standards and assessments. We did so in part to make sure our understandings of the schools were based on multiple perspectives, including but not limited to the perceptions of the principal. The interviews and site visits were conducted between January and May 2001.

Our interviews, survey questions, and site visits sought to elicit the following information about each school: [12]

- Elements of the school 's strategy to raise student achievement
- Challenges the school faces in raising student achievement
- Principal, teacher and student attitudes toward new state standards and tests

- Characteristics that might affect student learning (e.g. size, teacher qualifications, percentage of students taking advanced courses, levels of teacher collaboration, parental involvement, etc.)
- Changes in key areas over the past two years (e.g. funding, student composition, staff composition)

According to our data, our groups of improving and comparison schools share some common characteristics. On average, they serve similar student populations, and are similar in size, class size and teacher qualifications.[13] These factors do not appear to explain the difference in student achievement gains identified above.

Furthermore, a great majority of schools in our sample report that they are "more focused" than they were prior to the WASL. They talk about using their professional development time to "get everyone on board" with a few school-wide goals, especially in the areas of reading and writing. Some schools are using data from the WASL and other sources to identify their goals, and are talking about how they are going to better use their resources to help students who are struggling. All of these steps reflect the kinds of "good practices" identified in prior reports on fast-improving elementary and middle schools.

When we compare the group of improving schools to the group of comparison schools, however, important differences emerge. In Part II of our report we will describe these differences in greater detail.

Limitations of the study

This study provides valuable information regarding the nature of "fast-improving" high schools in Washington State. It also highlights some of the challenges faced by many schools in our sample, improving and comparison alike. Nevertheless, the information has its limitations. First, our school selection was based on the testing performance of high schools over a very short period of time. Based on findings from a previous report, Making Standards Stick, it would be unwise to assume that all of the schools we have labeled "fast improving" will continue to make such strong gains. Nevertheless, our conclusions are still a useful first cut at how high schools can begin to ensure students a realistic chance to succeed on the tenth grade WASL. Second, our study is based solely on outcomes related to the WASL. Future investigations of student achievement gains might include outcomes based on other assessments, such as the 9th grade ITBS or SAT exams, to strengthen our confidence that the data reflect meaningful gains in students' abilities to read, write, communicate, compute, and think.

The findings we share here reflect the experiences of a sample of high schools, and should not be viewed as the reality of all schools across the state. While education and community leaders can use this information to take action to help more schools achieve gains in student learning, the strategies outlined should not be considered a "checklist" to be implemented in every school. The strategies that work in each school will depend on the unique circumstances of that school.

Part Two: Findings

In this part, we summarize our major findings in three sections. In Section I, we present the ways in which improving schools differ from the comparison schools in our sample. While the two groups of schools share some common characteristics and strategies for raising student achievement, improving high schools pressed forward with their plans with greater focus and determination to succeed. They were more likely than comparison schools to view the new standards and tests as an opportunity to improve, and they acted upon that belief. In contrast to comparison schools, they took steps to make the new state expectations relevant to students and teachers, and they pressed themselves to improve even when there was no immediate pressure to do so.

In Section II, we describe how improving schools took one of three general approaches to responding to the new state expectations. While a very small group of schools focused on "test preparation" alone, the majority of improving schools used the new state standards and tests as a tool to focus adult and student efforts to improve in a more lasting way. Many prepared students for the testing experiences, but at the same time began to adjust their curriculum and instructional practices to ensure more students will have the knowledge and skills they need to meet or exceed the state's new standards. A third group of schools, however, took a different approach. Rather than making the standards and tests their primary emphasis, these schools incorporated the new state expectations into a strategy for raising student achievement that focused on research-based "best practices." In this section, we will show some preliminary evidence that schools following this approach made slightly greater gains in student achievement than other improving schools.

Despite these promising findings, our conversations with principals and teachers also revealed major challenges that both improving and comparison schools face in making changes at their schools. Section III presents the four major challenges that principals and teachers in most schools (improving and comparison alike) agree limit their capacity to make even greater gains in student learning.

Section I:

Improving schools move forward with their plans to raise student achievement while many comparison schools get sidetracked.

When we compare the group of improving schools to the group of comparison schools several important distinctions emerge. First, improving schools seem to be pursuing a more clearly articulated, commonly understood approach to raising student achievement. For some, this approach was already in place before the new standards and tests were adopted. More commonly, however, improving schools capitalized on the new state expectations as a way to focus their efforts to improve. Second, most improving schools forged ahead with their plans for improvement, in spite of uncertainties about the future of accountability in Washington State. They did so primarily by taking seriously the challenge to raise expectations, and by making those expectations meaningful to students and teachers. In the process they began to address the serious challenges that many high schools face in bringing about change. By contrast, many comparison schools admit that they struggled to find a focus or got sidetracked along the way. While they took some positive steps to increase student learning and respond to the new state expectations, their efforts were limited by doubts about the direction of state reform and a desire not to "disturb" anyone in the process of making change.

Improving schools differ from comparison schools in five important ways. They:

- Pick a strategy for raising student achievement and stick to it despite the challenges and distractions they face.
- Embrace the new state expectations and WASL as positive tools for bringing about changes in their curricula, instruction and programs.
- Make new expectations for students count by building them into the existing structure of grades and course credits.
- Get in touch with individual students by creating smaller learning communities and tapping into students' opinions about their schools.
- Take responsibility for gaps in student learning by pressing teachers to examine shortcomings in student achievement and keeping up the pressure to improve, even when their districts and communities seem satisfied with their efforts.

In this section, we will discuss these important differences in how improving high schools moved forward with their plans to improve while many comparison schools did not.

Improving schools pick a strategy and stick to it

Principals in many improving schools credited the new state standards and tests with giving them a common framework around which to organize their efforts as a school. Some improving school principals said:

> *I think the WASL played a major role in... causing us to focus because now we have pretty specific goals that we must reach. Before it was just a general education. We had a general program and had some pretty general goals. So, we weren't as specific as we needed to be.*

> *[The WASL has] created a sense of urgency that we're here now and we've got to get better; the other thing that I like about it is that it's created a common set of standards that all kids need to meet and so when we talk about things that we do in the building now that are not directly WASL related, what we're talking about is a standards-based evidence - what tells you that kids have gotten these skills? It's not just an intuitive thing.*

While the new standards and tests offered a framework, these schools actively worked to create that focus as well. As this principal explained, improving schools fought the tendency to add more and more priorities to their plate.

> *One of the things that the administrators here have pushed is we pick the things that we wanted to work on and we phased them in: writing, reading and math. Then we said - no more.*

One principal described his school 's experience over the past nine years. After identifying a need to improve the school 's climate, the school staff agreed to focus their efforts on making sure every student in the building would have a personal relationship with at least one teacher in the school. With that goal in mind, they adopted a block schedule, allowing teachers longer class periods to get to know and work with individual students. The school decided to allow students more flexibility in selecting their classes, in an effort to mimic a college-like experience and to increase students' motivation to learn. They also supported new student activities and community service opportunities to promote a "sense of real family community within the school." In addition, the principal began actively recruiting and hiring qualified, "student-centered" teachers who were committed to creating the kind of school that he and others envisioned.

The school's efforts have reaped some rewards, but have not been without challenges. In annual satisfaction surveys students overwhelmingly report that they "have a teacher who cares about them." But at the same time, the principal acknowledges that in some cases, some teachers may have gone overboard to make students comfortable, at the expense of challenging them intellectually. The principal admits that "we are not challenging kids" in classes outside core classes like English and Math. Nevertheless, the school 's efforts to improve continue, with a new focus on translating the strong teacher-student relationships into deeper learning and greater student achievement.

By contrast, while most comparison schools also had plans for increasing student achievement, several acknowledged that they struggled to find the focus needed to pursue them aggressively. They saw potential for greater focus but felt pressure to meet the historic expectations of high schools to provide something for everyone.

> *There's are a lot of things that are good for kids, but get in the way of what we are trying to do... We [are] all about socialization, we 're about activities, we 're about athletics, we 're about band, we 're about the whole kid. The other stuff gets in the way of academics. It just does. Frankly that 's just the way we choose to do it, it works for us, and I don 't see that changing anytime soon.*

Some comparison principals acknowledged that they had a hard time letting go of the idea of being able to do everything. Others admitted that they did not pursue their improvement plans because they were distracted by other concerns.

> *It 's maybe because we are trying to teach it all. It 's hard to let go of things you like to teach.*

> *We had a mold problem in our school ... My goal for this year was to do cross-departmental things, but we did mold instead.*

Thus, while most improving schools pushed forward with their plans for improvement, many comparison schools got side-tracked along the way.

Improving schools embrace new standards and tests as valid and useful tools

Most improving school leaders view state standards and tests as valuable tools for improving upon their efforts to raise student achievement. They see them as the best available mechanism for measuring whether students have important skills and knowledge in the key areas of reading, writing and math. While improving school principals acknowledge that the system is not perfect, they do not dwell on those imperfections or attempt to downplay the importance of the test. These principals said:

> *We are very aware of the need to prepare students in a way that's appropriate for the WASL. We believe the WASL is a great way of assessing students, whether the WASL is a great test or not, really isn't the issue. It's the way the students should be tested and that's what we intend to do in every single class. Every single teacher is trying to give that deep understanding, getting students to understand and explain their knowledge versus doing the standard multiple choice, low level, factual material.*

> *What calmed some of the irritation down was once the teachers saw the EALRs and the benchmarks and my argument to each of the departments was - You guys tell me what's stupid about this? Which of the benchmarks do you think are silly? And, - Why would we ever want to teach a kid that? Or why should a kid know that? Well in general they are all pretty good. Now you will get arguments with folks about, - Now what a stupid prompt that was for the writing – it's too vague, it's not specific. So there has been some criticism of the test itself, but to me [it] is just a matter of ironing that out over the next several years. The state needs to begin to iron those things out.*

> *Beyond just the information that the WASL has, it's set a tone in other areas that says kids are going to have to be performing and demonstrating their abilities rather than [being evaluated on] just a teacher judgment.*

Figure 2 illustrates how improving school principals were more likely to report positive feelings towards the WASL than were principals of comparison schools.

Many comparison school principals, on the other hand, convey deep doubts about the validity and usefulness of the WASL, as well as the overall direction of state reform. Some acknowledge that while they support the idea of standards and accountability, they feel strongly that the test is overemphasized and that the system is setting some students up for failure.

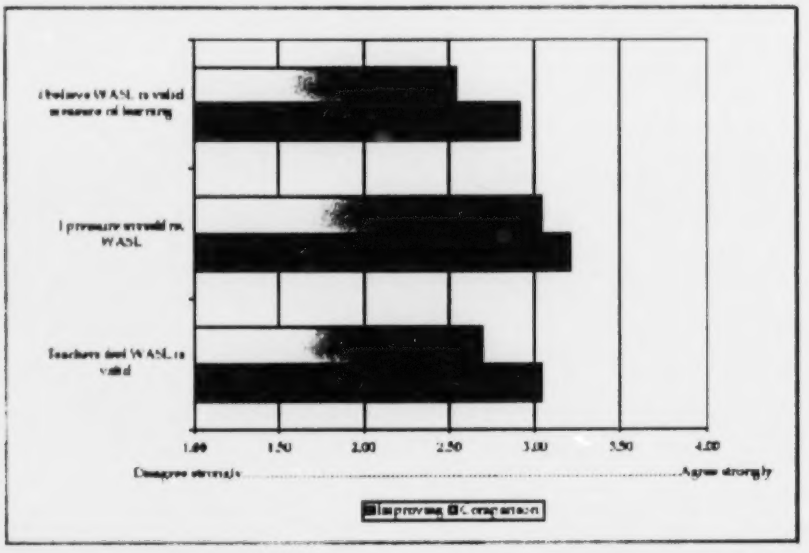
> *I'm not much of a fan of the WASL test quite frankly. I am pleased that I am retiring this year. I would not want to be in public education in the span of time from 2004 to 2006 because I think it will do some nasty things to kids.*

> *That leads me to my philosophical notion of the test. I think it's way over-emphasized. It's forcing schools to gear themselves to a test, rather than it being a monitoring of kids, it has become the focal point of education. I continually remind my staff that, although we have to prepare kids for the test, the test isn't the most important thing that's going on in the kids' lives with education.*

These fears are widespread, even in some improving schools. On the whole, however, comparison school principals more frequently report doubts about the potential for

Figure 2.

Improving school principals report more positive feelings toward the WASL



using the new standards and tests as a lever for positive change in their schools. One might argue that the doubts of some principals are a result of, rather than a cause of, their schools' performance on the WASL. However, while comparison schools did not make as significant gains in reading and math as improving schools, many of them did make some gains. Several of these schools also received positive feedback from their districts or local press for their WASL scores, making it unlikely that their perspectives are the result of "sour grapes" due to poor performance on the test.

Another possible explanation of the differences in attitude suggests a more complex scenario. Some principals may feel more positive about the usefulness of the WASL because they are more optimistic about the potential for improvement at their schools, and thus they welcome the information that the test may reveal. Indeed it may be that some school's successes in raising student achievement come not only from keeping a positive attitude toward the test, but also from maintaining a deeper belief in their own capacity to identify and successfully address significant shortcomings in their efforts thus far. Further inquiry into school leaders' sense of efficacy is needed to better understand the relationship between the improving school principals ' attitudes and their schools' gains in student achievement.

Improving schools make higher expectations count, even if the WASL does not

Our earlier studies found that successful elementary and middle schools "act as if expectations matter."[14] They believe that students will reach higher standards if they are pressed by adults to do so. In the short run, these elementary and middle schools did not need to make their expectations concrete (by setting exit standards or other

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mechanisms to hold students accountable) because they could exhort greater effort by asking students to try harder.

High school students, on the other hand, often need to be convinced of the logic behind adult exhortations. They demand more information about the value of what they are being asked to do. While they may be enticed by sophisticated incentives (i.e. rewards related to significant goals in their lives such as graduating on time, going to college or getting a good job), some studies show they are also prone to expending the least amount of effort necessary to accomplish their goals.[15]

Many principals in our study report that, in the first years of testing, some students did not take the WASL seriously because it was not connected to their grades, credits, graduation status or post-high school prospects. When faced with the challenge of student apathy, improving schools were not content to wait for the Certificate of Mastery to make their higher expectations "count." Instead, these schools:

- Set a tone of seriousness around the WASL.
- Tied the WASL to something of meaning to students.
- Made concrete their higher expectations for students.

Improving schools set a tone of seriousness around the WASL

Improving schools acted as if the WASL counted even when it did not yet have any significant consequences attached (such as the Certificate of Mastery). They believed that adults could set a tone of seriousness around the test and worked to convince students of its importance.

My philosophy is that if the teachers take it seriously, the kids will take it seriously.

We used all the teachers in the school to help proctor the exams and we let the kids know this is really serious, so only they (sophomores) would come in [to school in] the morning and take the test.

I think the first time we did it (took the WASL) the kids weren't focused. We didn't do a good job of focusing them. The test - there's no payoff for these kids, so we really have to sell it for them so that they'll do their best. And we have kids who would not show up for the test and of course that counts against us and hurt us. Last year we had smaller testing groups and we provided incentives. We had raffles and gave different things for kids to show up and make sure that they were here.

Some principals reported that they went to every tenth grade classroom to talk to students about the new state standards and tests. They encouraged students to do their best not only because it was the right thing to do, but also because the data could help the school better target its efforts to help students succeed in school. A few appealed to students' sense of pride by reminding them that the scores would be in the local newspaper or by challenging them to do better than a rival high school.

Improving schools tie the WASL to something of meaning to students

In the absence of a credible reward or sanction such as the Certificate of Mastery, many schools struggled to make the test meaningful to some students.

One principal quipped:

> *If we can tie it to their driving, to their driver's license, I think we [will] see higher scores.*

Determined to make the WASL "count" even when it did not, improving schools found creative ways to tie the WASL to things that they believe matter to students. Some of the incentives improving schools experimented with included:

- Indicate on student transcript if student passes sections of the WASL
- Give course credit for taking each section of the test
- Give course credit for passing each section of the WASL
- Give a WASL-like assessment that counts as a final exam
- Hold a luncheon for those who pass all four sections of the test

These improving school principals explained:

> *We try to make it important to them. One way that we did that is we give them a quarter of an elective credit for each area of the WASL that they meet standard. So, they could earn up to one credit. For kids, that's a big incentive for them because truthfully before that, 5 days of testing meant nothing to them because it isn't on their transcript, it isn't something that is required for college, there was no incentive.*

> *We also have a policy, and if a student fails part of the WASL [math test], they would have to take another half year of math beyond the tenth grade.*

As a result of these efforts, improving schools felt that they saw an increase in students' seriousness toward the test from one year to the next.

> *We were impressed with our kids this last year because we felt that for the most part, they worked hard at the test.*

> *In fact, it was interesting, when we got the results of the sophomores' test, ninth graders complained - You guys blew the socks off [the test]. Now we're going to have to try to match that.*

Improving schools make higher expectations concrete

Increasing student motivation to achieve to higher standards is not solely a challenge related to the WASL. Several improving schools believe that for long-term improvement to occur, they need to make those higher expectations a regular part of students' daily lives. To do so, some schools took action to embed their higher expectations into the existing system of grading, course credits and graduation. For instance, a handful of schools created new entrance or exit criteria for required English or math classes, thus trying to make sure students master certain skills before moving into their electives. Other schools required all students to complete a rigorous academic research paper or culminating project in order to graduate. One school, confounded by students' efforts to "get by" with all D grades, simply got rid of the grade. To pass a class, students would have to do C-level work. (The principal believes strongly that C-level work has not just become D-level work).

By making these changes, many improving schools hoped that students (and teachers) would be compelled to aim for these new targets and, in time, gain more of the knowl-

edge and skills they would need to succeed on the WASL. The following quotes from principals in improving schools illustrate how they made higher expectations for students more concrete:

> *And where as before, we had always allowed students just to go on their merry way in English. There was nothing sequential about it. You could take ninth grade English first semester, ninth grade English second semester, say fail one of those and still go on to tenth grade English, just knowing that you'd have to make the ninth grade English up at some other point. As we have looked at our writing scores, both in our own local district assessment and in our WASL scores, it is clear that we have some real needs in the area of writing and a couple of traits in particular. So now that introductory ninth grade English class has a number of writing standards in it and you cannot leave that class until you have finished those writing standards.*

> *The other thing that's a big emphasis right now is to make sure that all kids are at grade level in reading and math before they get into what we call a credit course. If [students] don't test at grade level, then we place them for one of their electives in an accelerated reader - enhanced writing class for the full year. We're trying to bring up the skill level before they get into a class that they are over their head and then they will fail and recycle through that class. We want to be more proactive.*

> *One of the reasons our math scores have been higher [is] because we require an extra year of math than the state. We require 3 full terms which gives them about a third to 40% more for all of our kids, not just college bound kids. That has helped a lot.*

Improving schools moved beyond the notion that higher expectations for students are simply a state of mind. Their efforts to make those expectations concrete suggest a more serious commitment to making real changes in their schools in order to ensure students can reach the new targets being set. Very few comparison schools, on the other hand, seemed to build higher expectations into the day-to-day lives of students and teachers. While some emphasized the importance of the test to students and others began to tie the WASL to incentives and rewards, on the whole, these schools were less likely to have made concrete their intentions to hold students accountable for reaching higher standards.

Improving schools get in touch with individual students' opinions and needs

Improving schools took steps to better connect with students, and in the process, hoped to find ways to motivate them to achieve. Improving schools:

- Created smaller learning communities for students and teachers to work together.
- Gathered and utilized data on students' opinions and needs.

Improving schools created smaller learning communities

When we asked students in five schools what mattered most to them about their schools, many indicated that their relationships with teachers were key. As these students explained:

> *What matters most about this school is the teachers that believe in us. Sometimes*

they probably expect too much, but only because we can do better.

I love the easygoing relationships we, as a smaller school, are able to have with our teachers. It's more fun to have a class where I am able to joke around and feel relaxed and I feel more motivated to succeed because I respect the teacher more.

The small classes make it so that the teachers can have more time to answer different questions. The teachers treat the students as equals but when the students prove that is not true, action is taken.

Many of the schools that participated in our study were small enough that teachers and students knew each other personally, allowing adults better opportunities to connect with individual students. Among the schools with more than 1000 students, however, improving schools were more likely to have re-organized themselves to create smaller learning communities in part to try to promote more personal relationships between students and teachers.

For some schools, this meant creating advisories where students were assigned to meet in small groups with the same teacher every day from freshman through senior year. Other schools re-organized their traditional department and grade level configuration so that teachers could team-up to provide interdisciplinary instruction to a smaller group of students. Principals from these improving schools explained:

We're designing academies to kind of reduce the scale of operation here. So our academies are looking at integrated cohesive curriculum for a cohort of kids taught by a group of collaborative teachers. We've done a lot of staff leadership development to kind of help design these academies and to look ahead to the future in terms of how we can operate as a large school with smaller learning communities built into the system here.

For me it's a matter of establishing relationships with kids. So, I spend a lot of my time just touching base with each of my mentor kids to see how they are doing and see what kind of help I can provide to them. It's so no kid is anonymous in this school and people will know the students. That's part of the personalization program.

Ideally, these smaller learning communities provide students and teachers more opportunities to connect, thereby giving teachers better insight into how they can help students succeed. While most schools in our sample acknowledge the challenge they face in getting some students engaged in learning, these improving schools attempted to address that issue by creating new relationships between teachers and students.

Improving schools solicited students' ideas about their schools

Several improving schools attempted to get more in touch with their students ' opinions about what is working and what needs to be improved at their school. They used surveys; exit interviews or informal conversations to better connect with students ' opinions on issues related to the WASL and beyond. These principals said:

We're doing a lot of research and survey data gathering now and getting parent and student input. I think that's powerful when teachers hear from parents and students that I don't enjoy being in this class or with this type of teaching - or, I don't see the connection of what I'm

doing to what I want to do down the road. That's powerful stuff.

That was one of the things that we found is that students don't see any reason for the stuff that they are doing and they don't see any value in it. They don't feel like they are learning anything. That was one of the reasons they didn't try on the WASL two years ago. Well, what we did once they took the WASL and the ITED, when they got the data back, we had them sit down with their own data and prepare a personalized learning plan. So, they analyzed their own data. They figured out what areas were strengths and what areas were weaknesses and then they set goals to try to improve those areas of weakness. It sounds great. The kids again didn't really buy into this too much as high school students.

In the process, improving schools gained some insight into the issues affecting student learning, as well as some ideas on how to increase students' motivation to achieve (some of which they admitted did not work).

While a few comparison schools report that they took steps to better connect with students, most did not. As these principals explained, they talked about the challenge, but had not done anything to address it thus far. Some even wondered if they could do anything to motivate reluctant students at all. Comparison school principals said:

Principal: So, [I said to teachers] let's look at what we can do as an organization to make things more motivating and engaging for kids.
Researcher: Can you tell me a little about what you have been doing so far?
Principal: We haven't done a whole lot this year, actually, specifically.
The kids that are motivated and into this thing, will roll with this thing and they will meet the standard, but the low kids that education is not the priority, they're not here because of English and math, they're here because they have to be here. They are going to struggle no matter what we do, and we worry about that because what's going to happen to them in 2006? The talk is they will just say - why would I want to be in that small group of 20%, 15% that isn't going to get my diploma. Why would I even be here, and they may drop out. So, that's the discussion we're having.

Improving schools press themselves to identify and close gaps in student learning

Principals in improving and comparison schools report that they must engage teachers in the school reform process to see measurable student achievement gains. Most schools that we talked to had engaged teachers in training on the EALRs, the format of the WASL, and in some cases the scoring of the test. Many schools also focused their staff development on training teachers in strategies for teaching reading and writing across the curriculum.

Taking these steps was no small endeavor. But improving schools pressed teachers to go farther to take responsibility for closing gaps in student learning. They did so in two ways. Improving schools:

- Exposed weaknesses in student learning to highlight areas for improvement.
- Kept up the pressure to improve.

Improving schools exposed weaknesses in student learning

Several improving schools report that while analyzing test scores and other achievement data, they also managed to raise the level of concern among teachers for the students in their charge. When teachers scrutinized student achievement data carefully, they saw more clearly the gaps in student learning that needed to be filled. Rather than try to rationalize those gaps or minimize the challenge, improving schools focused on how they could improve. Some improving principals said:

> *I know what we did and this was really uncomfortable, but we felt like it needed to be done. We took a look at the grades that -let's say the kids that failed the WASL, we looked at their grades in English; what teachers gave, how many C's, how many D's. For the kids that passed, we did the same thing and compared their grades to the WASL score. Even though there are other reasons why kids fail a class, and we told them that, [but] it created some anxiety in the English department. [Teachers said] "Is my curriculum what it should be? Is what I'm doing going to get them to this standard?"*

> *[Our junior research paper requirement] exposed some really frightening deficiencies in what we thought [was] our education here at this school. We still have about 100 [research] papers out that haven't met standard and they have had that assignment for 15 months. So I would say Joe Public walking down the street would think that most 17 and 18 year old students in our public schools could write a 5 to 7 page paper to a standard. We're discovering that [is] not necessarily the case.*

> *We took their tenth grade WASL math scores. We took the classes - the level of class they had, plus the teacher they had it from, and the grade they got, and we went individually kid-by-kid with our math department. And that took a little work. I did all that. That raised some accountability. One was because our grades did not compare with our WASL scores. We've found that we have inflationary grading going on and that there was not a true assessment. The assessment, WASL assessment, grade assessment were not matching.*

Once these schools knew their weaknesses, they were able to target their efforts to improve. Some schools re-focused their instruction to better develop all students ' reading, writing and math skills. Other targeted their assistance by requiring students performing below grade level to receive additional instruction in those areas.

While some comparison schools pressed teachers to examine gaps in students ' learning and to make changes based on that information, most did not. Most commonly, these principals acknowledge that without the immediate pressure of the Certificate of Mastery or another accountability mechanism, there was not a sense of urgency to press for change. While many improving schools moved forward to proactively identify and address their shortcomings, comparison schools seemed to be waiting for further clarity from the state. These comparison school principals said:

> *We are looking at actually maybe doing some...remediation for kids who do not meet the WASL [but] having only done [the WASL] for 2 years, we are not real sure on that, but we are looking at that.*

> *So, we've already talked about what we 'll need to do but it's so far out there that*

it's hard to get a high level of concern. Right now there's no point in doing it because if I had a WASL remedial writing class no one would take it because there's no pressure to. And there's no way to get them to retake the test so that you would know whether you did ever meet the standards. It's hard to do a lot of planning. We've talked about what types of courses we would need to generate and we feel we have the staff in place that would be able to do that effectively, but they're not quite needed yet.

As far as the overall concerns, I need to know what the plan is for the kids that don't pass. Will they get to retake it in six months? Do they have to wait until the next year at the same time and retake? Will they get to retake it both in their junior and senior years? What's the plan? Once we know the plan then we can devise our plan to how we would help get those kids to that level.

Improving schools kept up the pressure to improve

Many schools report that they do not yet feel a great deal of external pressure to improve. Their districts are focusing on elementary and middle schools, and their communities are not demanding anything different than before.

I think there is an expectation in our community that this is what you do for four years - you go to school, you go on time, you give it your best shot and at the end of four years you get a high school diploma.

Despite this absence of pressure from outside, very few improving schools report that they are satisfied with their students' performance on the WASL to date. Even those schools that started with very high scores in year one pressed themselves to make improvements in year two.

I don't think our results indicate the quality of our program, but people in [x town] are fairly pleased with our results because they look good relative to other urban high schools. I'm not real happy with them because I came from a school that scored much higher than this school, and I know that the programs were comparable. So I guess my sense is that our kids are under performing because they don't see the value in this exam.

Our concern is more internal. We have a sense that we can do a lot better than we have, but I think people on the outside looking in would say it's a pretty good high school, we like it. Don't change a thing.

People are going to say - "Gee you're really doing a good job. The highest in the state." I still have 20% of kids who do not [meet standards] and what are we going to do for them. That's real important to me.

Improving schools kept up the pressure to improve. They did so in part by setting new expectations for teachers, and making them an inescapable part of every teacher's job.

We have every English teacher teaching either freshman or sophomore classes. No one can say, well [the WASL] doesn't impact me.

We have some of our teachers that are more on board than others. [Some teachers'] preparation is better year-round and so we're still trying to make sure that everybody is on board and that's the reason for the writing assignment that I made for everybody. I'm going to monitor that, I told them that this morning

that I'm going to hold them accountable and monitor it because I know it won't happen with everybody if I don't.

It is pretty clear - we haven't made any bones with anybody here for the last couple of years that we feel like the Certificate of Mastery, the WASL, writing assessments, performance based curriculums, they are here to stay. They aren't going away. And that type of reform is so dramatic that as each faculty converts, it becomes harder and harder for the people that aren't on board to survive in the school.

By contrast, most comparison schools report that they feel satisfied with their students' performance on the WASL. While many took some steps to change their programs, they did not have a sense of urgency to their work. In some cases, principals acknowledge that they were overly concerned with the needs of adults in their building and thus not able to act as decisively as they would have liked. These principals said:

So, last year, no, I wasn't real proud of what we did, but we did it and we scored just like everybody else. We were right in the middle of the pack. There isn't anything that I put my finger on that I was real proud of other than we got it done with the least disruption.

I believe that the way we administered our test last year was a factor in our scores not being as high as I feel they should have been. We were too conscious of the needs of the adults in the organization. We tried hard not to disrupt the school schedule very much and to make sure that staff wasn't missing their planning time.

And, I think quite honestly, we rested on our laurels a little because we're used to having high scores.

When the gaps in student learning are great, it would be tempting to deflect responsibility and assume that students who do not succeed simply lack the will to do so. Many improving schools resisted this temptation. Instead they took responsibility for gaps in student learning by exposing those gaps and keeping up the pressure improve. Improving and comparison schools both report that they face resistance from teachers who did not see the need to change what they are doing. Nevertheless, improving schools pressed forward, trying to engage teachers and listen to their concerns, but did not allow their efforts to be derailed in the process.

Conclusion

Like their elementary and middle school counterparts, improving high schools moved ahead with their plans for improvement in spite of some of the significant challenges that they face. They chose a strategy for improvement and stuck to it despite competing priorities and distractions. Rather than dwelling on the shortcomings of the new standards and tests, they viewed them as tools for focusing their efforts to better meet students' needs. Improving schools addressed the issue of student motivation by making higher expectations concrete, by making the WASL count, and by connecting with students in new ways. They engaged teachers more fully in the challenge of closing the gaps in students' learning by making those gaps clear and by maintaining the pressure to improve.

While many comparison schools were tentative in their efforts to move forward, most improving schools capitalized on the new standards and tests as a way to leverage

adult and student efforts to improve. In the next section, we will discuss how improving schools took three general approaches to address the new state expectations for students.

Section II:

While most improving schools focus primarily on gearing their programs to the new standards and tests, some take a different approach.

Our data reveal a range of actions that improving high schools are taking to increase student achievement in Washington's new standards-based environment. Most improving schools' approaches went beyond simple "test preparation" to begin to address the need for more lasting changes in what is being taught, by whom, and how. On the whole, these schools' strategies fell into three broad approaches: Preparing students for the testing experience; making sure students are exposed to curriculum and instructional methods that mirror the state standards and test; and finally, pursuing strategies for increasing student achievement based on "best practices" [16] identified in school improvement literature. Table 1 outlines some of the actions that improving schools are taking.

In this section we will discuss the strategies of 24 of the 26 improving schools in our sample. We exclude two schools because we were unable to collect sufficient information to make a clear assessment of their overall strategy for improvement. From our data, we identified only 2 improving schools whose strategies focused solely on "test preparation" activities, such as raising student awareness of the test, incorporating WASL-like strategies into their teaching practices, and making adjustments to the testing environment.

The majority of improving schools (14 schools) focused both on making sure students will be exposed to the material and instruction required by the new state standards and tests, and on preparing students for the test-taking experience. These schools adopted the new state expectations as their own targets and began coordinating adult and student efforts to reach those

Table 1

Improving schools take a variety of actions to raise achievement

Schools' strategies follow three general approaches
Prepare students for the test-taking experience
• Raise student, adult awareness about the test and its consequences
• Provide rewards and incentives for taking / passing the test
• Improve the test taking environment so students have a better chance to succeed
• Familiarize students with testing format
Expose students to required material and instruction; provide extra help
• Adjust curriculum to match new learning expectations
• Adjust instruction to promote reading, writing, math, listening, problem-solving
• Identify students who need extra help to meet standards
• Target resources to those students who are struggling
Focus on "best practices" identified by research and other practitioners
• Engage all students in rigorous academic experiences
• Collaborate across grade levels, disciplines, schools
• Create smaller learning communities, personalization

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goals. They reviewed and adjusted their curriculum in light of the new standards and tests. They focused their improvement efforts on reading, writing and math, and engaged teachers in training to learn instructional techniques that will develop students' problem solving skills. Some schools also identified students who were below grade level and supported them with special classes, after school programs or computer-assisted instruction. At the same time, most of these schools took steps to improve the actual testing experience by raising awareness of the importance of the test, adjusting their test environment, and incorporating "WASL-like" activities into most classes.

Eight improving schools, however, took a different approach. These schools typically organized themselves around a set of "best practices" that they believe will result in lasting gains in student learning (e.g. increasing the proportion of students taking advanced placement classes or creating smaller learning communities for students and teachers to better connect).

Upon the adoption of the new state standards, these schools worked to incorporate the new expectations into their existing efforts. They viewed the standards and tests as valuable tools for measuring student achievement, but were not wed to them as their primary targets for student learning.

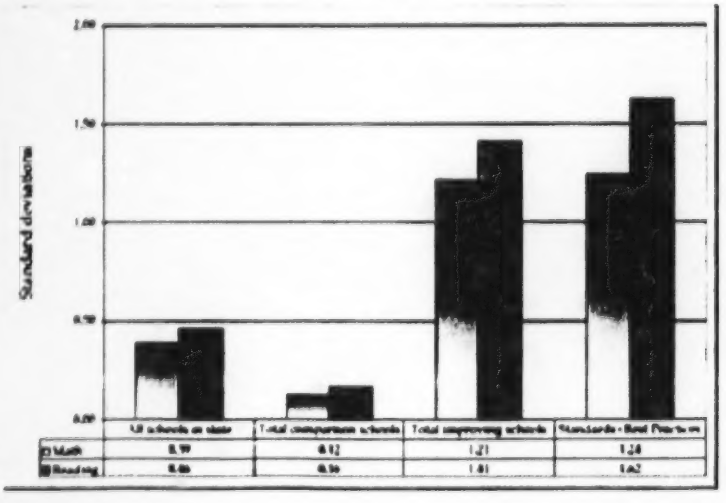
One principal explained:

> *What we are going to worry about is that we are teaching well; that we're teaching for deep understanding. We're getting the kids to move and we're doing appropriate assessments in our classes all the time. Then we'll let the WASL fall into place.*

Our findings suggest that, among improving schools, those that worked to incorporate the standards into an existing "best practices" strategy made slightly greater gains than other improving schools. Figure 3 illustrates the difference in effect scores [17] between the two groups.

Figure 3.

For tenth grade reading and math, scale scores rose more for "standards + best practices" schools than for improving schools overall.

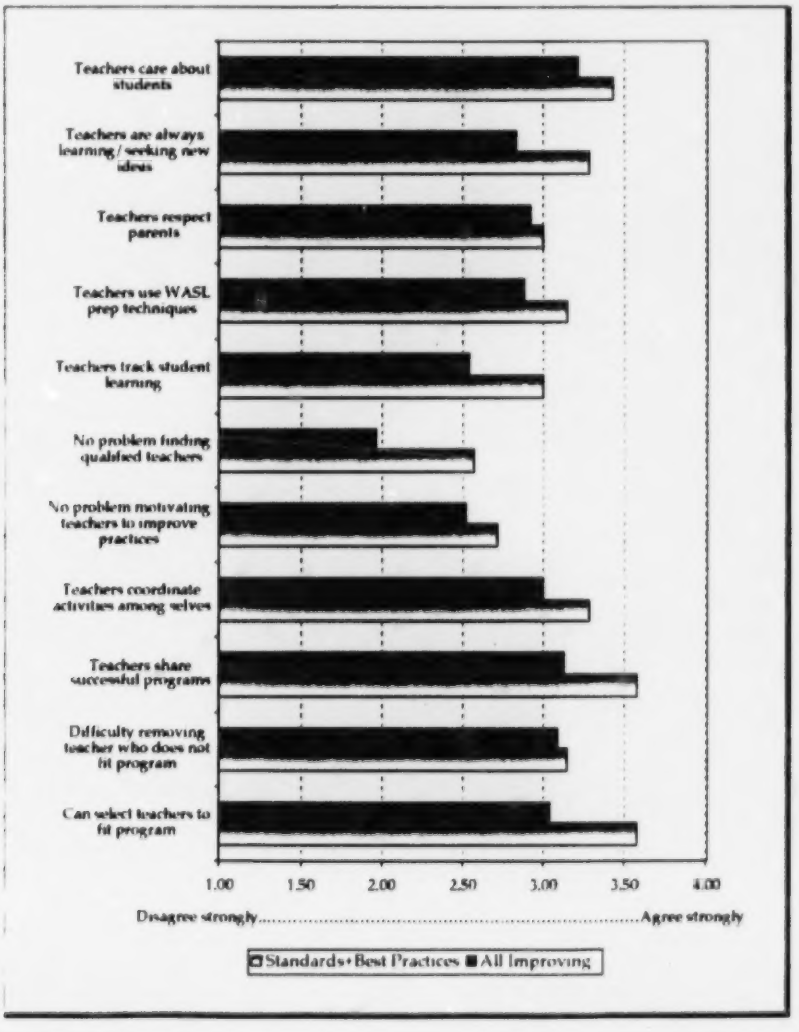


These schools reported some other important differences as well. They reported higher levels of teacher cooperation and were more likely to agree that students arrived at their schools prepared for the academic challenges of high school. Figure 4 illustrates these differences.

The meaning of the findings in Figure 4 is not self-evident. On the one hand, the differences could tell us that schools that take a comprehensive approach to raising student learning (i.e. they pursue an approach that includes but is not primarily focused on gearing their curriculum and instruction

Figure 4.

Schools that focus on standards + best practices report more teacher cooperation and control .



to the state standards and tests) experience more teacher cooperation and student preparation. On the other hand, it is possible that these schools' circumstances (i.e. more control over teacher selection, better prepared students) allow them to pursue more fundamental changes in school organization and relationships.

A third explanation may be that the principals' perception of the quality of students and teachers (rather than the actual level of student preparation and teacher cooperation) in the school colors those leaders ' sense of what is possible, thus spurring them to take on and effectively lead more ambitious reform efforts. Additional inquiry is needed to understand the nature of the differences represented here and to confirm the effect of these schools' strategies on their test scores.

It is important to note that comparison schools appear to be using the same range of strategies as improving schools.[18] We found some comparison schools that took steps to adjust their programs to the new standards and tests, and yet did not see the same level of achievement gains as improving schools that made similar changes. We also found some comparison schools that organized themselves around a set of "best practices" but did not achieve as dramatic increases as improving schools. As we described in Section I of our findings, however, comparison schools were more likely than improving schools to doubt themselves or get distracted in their efforts to pursue their strategies for improvement. These findings suggest that while some strategies may be more promising than others for raising student achievement, the results depend on the level of commitment and process of implementation at each school.

Section III:

Improving schools made gains in spite of the challenges they face.

One might argue that improving schools made greater gains on the WASL over the two-year period because these schools face fewer challenges than their comparisons. Our surveys and interviews, however, suggest that this is not the case. While some schools reported much more difficult circumstances (more student behavior issues, fewer resources, less stable leadership), those schools were evenly divided among our improving and comparison groups.

Our data confirm that most schools, improving and comparison alike, face some common challenges in making higher expectations a reality. Principals and teachers in many schools concur that there are four central challenges that they must overcome in order to ensure that all students have a reasonable opportunity to reach their fullest potential in a standards-based system. These challenges are:

- Motivating students to give their best effort.
- Leveraging teachers' commitment and efforts to change.
- Closing significant learning gaps in a limited amount of time.
- Working in an environment of uncertainty about the future of state reform and accountability.

In this section, we pool the responses from both improving and comparison schools, as we did not detect significant differences between the two groups with regard to the nature of the challenges they face.

Motivating students to give their best effort

Most improving and comparison schools report that, in the absence of a concrete reward like the Certificate of Mastery or another accountability measure, they face a pressing challenge to convince students to do their best on the WASL. The following quotes from principals illustrate this situation:

> *Our first experience with the WASL was that our students just blew it off. We had kids that were refusing to take the WASL to the point that proctors would send at least four students down to my office because they were refusing to do it. I got on the phone, talked to their parents. The parents told the kids to do the WASL. The kid goes back to class and still doesn't do it.*

> *I think staff here feels that selling kids on the credibility of the exam has been a real problem. It's a low stakes deal and kids -- urban kids, at least -- figure that out quickly.*

Student apathy toward the test is troubling on two levels. First, if students do not give their best effort on the test, the data provided by the WASL may not reflect accurately what students know and can do. Some students who have the capacity to pass the WASL may not do so. As a result, schools may question the appropriateness of the WASL data as a tool for planning and accountability.

Second, some schools acknowledge that apathy toward the WASL is a symptom of deeper doubts that students harbor about the value of school. Research on high school students' attitudes towards school reveals that while most students want to be challenged, many too are practiced in the art of "getting by."[19] Principals and teachers in our study agree that some students are internally motivated to do their best work in school while others are more skeptical of the rewards they will reap. Many students, they report, question the logic behind

adult exhortations to complete certain tasks or reach certain goals. This reluctance to engage in school more fully may spring from any number of sources, including prior experiences in school, poor relationships with adults and peers, and perhaps negative perceptions of themselves as students. Overcoming these barriers is a serious challenge for schools, and some principals acknowledge that they are not entirely sure how to address the issue. They recognize, however, that they will need to do more than offer inspiring speeches or enticing rewards to compel some students to re-engage in learning.

Leveraging teachers' commitment and efforts to change

Teachers play a key role in making standards work. They translate expectations into learning objectives, activities and assignments, and make sure students have a reasonable opportunity to succeed on the WASL. Principals in our sample contend that for standards-based reform to work, schools need to leverage teachers' cooperation and expertise, as they are the connectors between abstract "EALRs" and day-to-day student learning.

Leveraging teachers' support and skills to make standards meaningful is not easy. Roughly one-third of principals in our study report that half or fewer of their teachers "take responsibility for improving the school." About 60% of the principals we interviewed say that half or fewer of their teachers share lesson plans with other teachers, coordinate their efforts with other grade levels or use student data to shape their teaching. Only 36% of principals agree that most or all teachers "feel responsible when a student fails." One principal said:

> *There's some resistance from some members of the faculty. On the surface, it appears to be real good buy-in, but in practice, there's probably 20% of our staff that are not doing too much with any of our efforts, quite frankly.*

Improving and comparison schools identify three main problems that inhibit greater teacher participation in the reform process. These problems are:

1. Organizational barriers that make teacher collaboration difficult.
2. Too many competing priorities and demands for teachers' time.
3. Some teachers' reluctance to embrace new ways of working.

Prior studies document the organizational and time constraints that limit teachers' capacity to participate in school reform efforts.[20] Our conversations with principals reveal that these challenges are indeed real. For many schools, however, the most vexing problem is to find ways to bring reluctant teachers "on board" with school-wide efforts to change. Some principals explained:

> *We haven't solved in an effective way how to get teachers the time and the motivation to really look at being different. We do that somewhat and we have early release days and we have the LID (Learning Improvement) days. Our school accreditation process is contributing to a change in attitude, but it's still difficult to say I've got to teach my five classes, I've got to correct all these papers, I have to do all this stuff and at the same time I'm supposed to look at doing it differently. I think that's the bur. There may be even a deeper barrier in that doing things differently is scary. Doing what I'm doing now, at least I know what*

I'm doing. Doing them totally different. I'm not sure what that will mean. Maybe a bigger barrier is just the fear of doing something different. Fear of failure.

You have to fight to do it. Fight the staff, fight the community, in order to change because people's tendency is not to want to change because when I went to school it was this way and by golly why do we have to do anything different? That's a tough one.

The reasons for resistance are multiple. Teachers themselves report that they do not always see a compelling need to change what they are doing. Principals concur that it is difficult to convince some staff to leave behind their ways of working when, by some measures (SAT scores, college admissions, even WASL scores), those ways are indeed working. Some principals explained:

My staff I think would say - and we have very little staff turnover - this is a great place to be. We have great kids and things have gone well like this for the last 50 years and why would we want to change that. You're right, for the top 20% of the kids it's gone great. It's a great school. The other 80-70% that struggle, we need to do a better job. It's hard to convince people of that because of the way the system has been run and set up over the years.

It's really hard to convince the math department that they need to get better. They don't see the urgency or the need. The change there has been more of nibbling around the edges a little bit. The other thing that's a bit tough to convince them that changes are needed is they look at other test data like the computational part of the SAT - our kids are just ripping it apart and we're running 50 to 60 kids out of a senior class of 250 through AP calculus. All of them were taking AP exams. Three-quarters of them were getting a three or higher. So, it's hard to convince them that the math program needs a lot of change.

Other teachers told us that their reluctance to "get on board" stems from a genuine concern about the reliability and validity of the WASL, and about the way in which that data will be used to hold students and schools accountable. Errors in the test or scoring process revealed over the past few years heightened their concerns. Furthermore, given the significant ground that some students have to make up prior to taking the WASL (especially those students learning English as a second language), some teachers worry that the system will penalize students who simply run out of time before they have to pass the test.

Whatever the source of their concerns, teachers are key players in the process. Improving and comparison schools report that they must find ways to engage teachers, to leverage their support and expertise, in order to ensure that all students have the opportunity to meet or exceed the standards set by the state. As this principal put it:

There is a hole in the boat. It doesn't matter which end it's at. The whole boat will sink. So, we've got to have everybody paying attention to kids being successful.

Closing significant learning gaps in a limited amount of time

Schools at every level in a standards-based environment must work quickly to close gaps in student learning. When the stakes are high, the pressure on high schools, however, will be palpable as they are the final stop before students are eligible to graduate.

It is remarkable that only 22% of principals in our study agree that students arrive at high school prepared for the academic challenges they will face. They explain that the gaps in learning are both deep and wide. Some students who fell behind in elementary and middle school never caught back up, arriving in high school with reading and writing skills equivalent to a fifth grade level. Other students are trying to learn English while at the same time working to master concepts in algebra, history or science. High schools' charge is to bring those students up to speed as quickly as possible, while also offering challenging learning experiences for students who can do college level work. One principal explained:

> *Our teachers are saying - How do I meet the needs? It's one thing to meet the different levels of kids if there's a little bit of difference like when you and I went to school. How do you ask a teacher to challenge both ends when there is that big a spread? That's the frustration.*

Many principals and teachers are counting on the fact that, in time, students moving up through the new standards-based system will arrive at high school more prepared. Most acknowledge, however, that they will have to provide more targeted assistance to students who are struggling. While some principals report that their school districts are trying to address the problem more immediately (by setting exit standards for lower grades or requiring summer school for students who are below grade level), most feel they have not yet seen the results of those efforts.

Working in an environment of uncertainty

High schools report that they are working in an environment of uncertainty. While most principals and teachers believe that, in some way, the Certificate of Mastery will become a reality, they have many questions about the future system of accountability. At the time of this report, the state legislature has not outlined the details of how it will help or hold responsible schools that struggle to affect gains in student learning over time. Furthermore, schools are not sure how key players (students, teachers, parents, community members, the legislature) will respond when the WASL "counts."

Principals and teachers wonder:

- How will WASL data be used to evaluate students, teachers and schools?
- Will students and schools get credit for their improvement over time as well as their absolute scores?
- How many chances will students have to pass the test?
- What kind of support will the state, districts, and communities provide to schools that serve large proportions of students that are working well-below grade level?
- Will student motivation and scores rise when the WASL "counts"?
- Will parents, community members and legislators support accountability if significant numbers of students are not eligible to graduate?

Many principals report that until the details of the system are clear, some teachers will continue to doubt that "accountability" will ever become a reality. With each new proposal to change the system or push back the date for when the WASL counts, some principals feel that their job of leveraging teacher cooperation gets more difficult. Ambiguity about the future feeds their belief that "this too shall pass."

Principals explained:

> *A key factor in making all this work is the buy-in of the teachers and I wish that the debate were over at the state level about whether or not this is really going to happen in 2006. Every time that the state talks about extending the deadline for this or maybe uncoupling the WASL from the graduation requirement, it gives the nay-sayers an opportunity to say - yep, this too shall pass. I don't know if there is anything that can be done about that because it's such a political baby as well. But I wish that we were a little closer to when it was going to count as a graduation requirement because I think that would help focus our efforts.*

> *Right now there are a lot of teachers that are just sitting back and waiting and seeing, because they are not sure that this is going to survive. Every year when new bills are put on the floor and you are trying to determine if they are going to come out of subcommittee, they're saying, well, we'll see if they are going to throw the whole thing away again. We are creating our own doubt.*

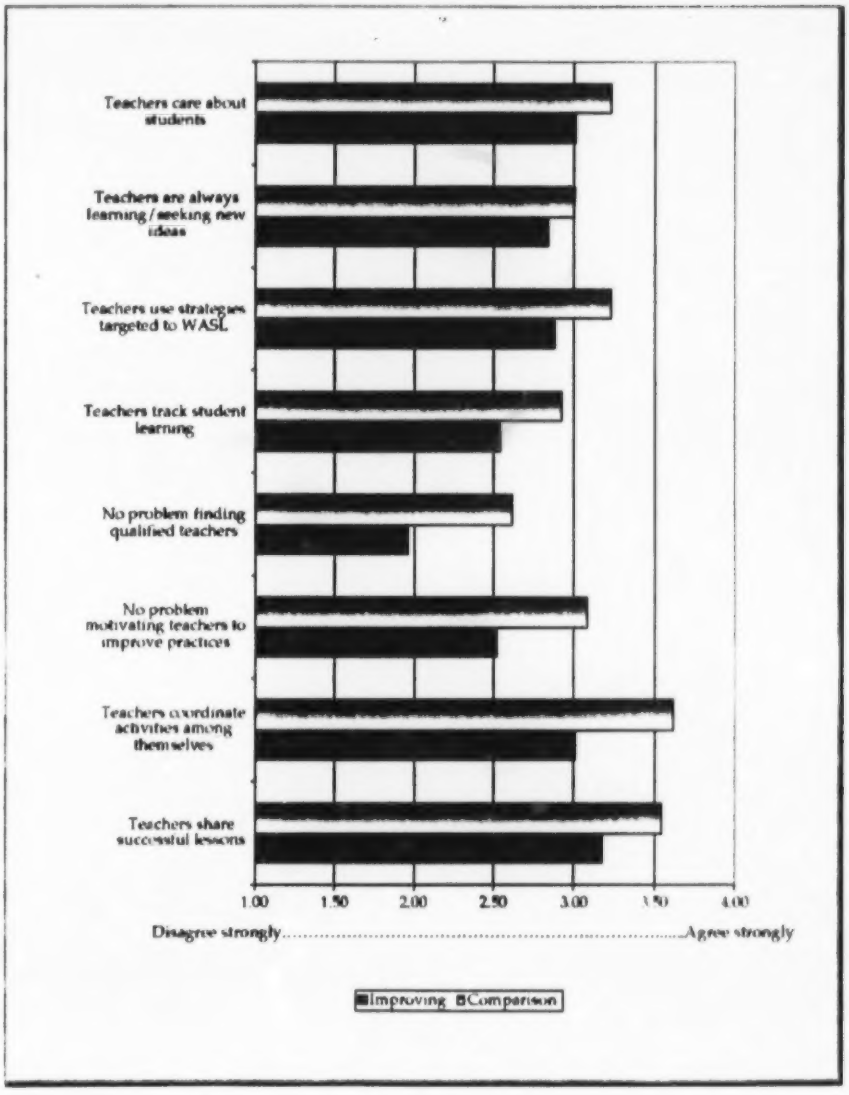
According to some schools, when details at the state level are clarified, their strategies for increasing student learning will be as well. In the meantime, schools must make plans and move forward in the midst of all their questions about the future of school reform in Washington State.

Improving schools report slightly higher levels of challenge. Their capacity to press forward does not appear to be the result of better circumstances or fewer challenges. In fact, on average, improving school principals report slightly lower levels teacher cooperation and engagement in reform activities. Figure 5 illustrates this.

Despite their challenges, improving schools made greater gains on the WASL from 1999 to 2000. More so than their comparisons, these schools forged ahead with their plans to improve, even in the midst of student apathy, teacher reluctance, significant gaps in student learning, and uncertainty about how schools will be held accountable for their efforts to close those gaps.

Figure 5.

Improving schools report lower levels of teacher cooperation.



Part Three: Analysis

This part of our report is divided into two sections. In Section I, we discuss our findings in light of state and local leaders' hopes to bring about major changes in schools throughout Washington, as well as research on other large-scale reform efforts in other states. Section II offers recommendations for how state and local actors can help high schools stay the course of raising and meeting higher expectations for all students.

Section I:

Making Standards Meaningful: Can Most High Schools Achieve Lasting Improvements in Student Learning?

Two previous reports, Making Standards Work and Making Standards Stick, looked at how elementary and middle schools are making standards work for their students, teachers and communities. These studies found that fast-improving schools share several common strategies. In particular, they acted as if their expectations mattered by focusing relentlessly on raising student achievement, coordinating their efforts school-wide, and targeting their resources to key school goals.

In this study, the surface differences we found between improving and comparison high schools were less stark than those reported in elementary and middle schools. Many high schools, improving and comparison, followed similar paths to address the new state expectations. Every school in our sample reviewed its curriculum and instruction to make sure its efforts matched the expectations set by the new standards and tests. Many schools also focused their efforts on improving reading and writing instruction so as to better prepare students for the WASL. The commonalities between improving and comparison schools' approaches are likely due to the fact that high school principals and teachers had several years to watch their peers at the elementary and middle levels struggle to address the new state expectations under increased public scrutiny of their efforts. Several high school principals also noted that they shared ideas with other schools at district workshops and state-level conferences.

When talking more in-depth with high school principals and teachers, however, important differences between improving and comparison schools emerge. Improving high schools were more clearly focused on their strategies for raising student achievement. They viewed the standards and tests more positively than their comparison peers, and took steps to use the new expectations as a tool to focus their efforts to improve student learning. Like their elementary school peers, improving high schools created a sense of urgency to their work even in the absence of strong external pressure to improve. By contrast, many comparison schools struggled to find and keep that drive to improve, especially while also trying to fulfill traditional expectations of teachers, students, families and community members.

In many ways, however, motivating students and teachers to work in new ways

was the most pressing challenge of both improving and comparison high schools. High levels of student apathy toward the WASL, and reluctance among some teachers to change their practices hindered many schools efforts to move forward. By embracing the challenge and emphasizing the importance of the new standards and tests, improving schools found important strategies for focusing students and teachers on the task at hand. While many schools believe that the Certificate of Mastery will help facilitate this process, improving schools were not content to wait for that to happen.

Nevertheless, in the long run, increased student and teacher motivation alone will not make up for serious gaps in students' knowledge and skills. As high schools move forward, they will need to find new ways to ensure that all students can reach the standards set by the state. Moving beyond surface level changes will not be easy even for schools that are focused and determined in their efforts. Several potential roadblocks threaten to limit their success. In the coming years, to avoid these roadblocks, high schools must:

Keep their focus on a limited number of goals

Additional state requirements may make it more challenging for schools to maintain their focus. As the number of WASL tests increases, and districts begin implementing the new requirements for a Culminating Project and a High School + Education Plan, some high schools will struggle even more to pursue a focused approach to raising student achievement. As schools try to incorporate these new targets and expectations into their plans, they will still be expected to raise students' reading, writing, math and listening scores. They will have to find ways to balance the multiple initiatives without diluting their efforts.

Provide targeted assistance without becoming "remediation centers"

Most high schools recognize that they will need to work differently to close the significant gaps in learning that some students bring to school. As more and more schools look for strategies to provide additional assistance to struggling students, they will be under pressure to provide more targeted instruction in reading, writing and math. For some schools the numbers of students who require extra support, however, may outstrip the school's capacity to provide such instruction. Schools may feel caught in a constant game of 'catch up.' This principal explained:

> *We [may] become a testing agency and we are constantly hiring people to re-test, test, remediate, test, and retest. That's not what we're in the business for, but that's what we're going to become because we've got to graduate our kids.*

Many principals acknowledge that they are not sure how they are going to fill the gap between where students are and where they need to be. They need help finding new strategies that enable teachers to accelerate students' mastery of basic skills while also giving them challenging, content-oriented learning opportunities.

Hold students to high standards while also acknowledging progress they have made

For some students, achieving at higher levels is primarily a matter of finding the will to do so. High schools in our study recognize that the Certificate of Mastery or other incentives will encourage many students to put in their best effort on the test. Some students, however, will not be moti-

vated to take the WASL seriously or to engage in school more generally. In some cases these students are facing serious personal issues that inhibit their interest in school. Several principals admit that they are not sure how they will be able to reach those kids.

> *I think we serve our top end very well and our special populations very well, but groups that have social issues that are getting in the way of their academic achievement, I don't think are being served well many places. Those are the kids I'd like to catch. And, those are the kids that tend to not pass the WASL and it has nothing to do with their abilities.*

On the other hand, some students, particularly those learning English as a second language, may have the drive to succeed but lack the skills that they need to do so. As schools move forward with standards-based reform, they will need to find a balance between holding all students to a higher standard while also recognizing their progress to date. Some schools believe that failing to do so will lower students ' motivation and thus create bigger challenges in helping them achieve.

Keep up the pressure to improve, but avoid teacher burnout

Lessons from fast-improving elementary and middle schools suggest that these schools are keeping up the pressure to improve. With the start of the Certificate of Mastery, many high school principals anticipate increased media attention, as schools try to make sure students have the skills they need to graduate. In this environment, the pressure to improve can have unintended consequences. Some principals predict that teachers will request transfers out of the ninth and tenth grades as the scrutiny increases. In a tight market for qualified and enthusiastic teachers, high schools will need to maintain the pressure to improve without squeezing out talented teachers.

Even with these challenges under control, meaningful improvements in student learning in most high schools are not assured. In a 1997 article entitled, *Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practices*, Richard Elmore argues that most large-scale reform initiatives fall short of impacting the "core of educational practice"; that is, "how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the students' role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and class work."[21] He attributes this failure to a lack of new incentives for teachers to assimilate new ways of working that "change the core of schooling in ways that result in most students receiving engaging instruction in challenging academic content."[22] Experiences in Chicago schools over the past decade further confirm the difficulties associated with realizing improvements in student achievement at the high school level.[23]

Standards-based reform in Washington State presents an important new incentive for schools to re-calibrate their practices to ensure more students receive such instruction. The state Essential Academic Learning Requirements identify a target that schools can use to develop a shared commitment to new definitions of the core relationship among "teacher, student and knowledge."

Our findings suggest that some schools are beginning to touch on those fundamental changes. They are moving beyond simply preparing students for the WASL, or even adjusting their curriculum and teaching methods to mirror the new state standards. Some improving schools in our sample are beginning to affect the deeper issues of what teachers expect from

students, what students themselves believe they can do, and how teachers and students engage with one another around important concepts, skills and experiences.

Our findings also suggest, however, that the depth of change in many classrooms is thus far limited. Principals in both improving and comparison schools acknowledge that most of the instructional changes thus far have focused on increasing the amount of writing and problem-solving students are required to do. Those schools that have made deeper changes to instruction (i.e. using interdisciplinary teaching, team teaching, more hands-on learning experiences) tend to attribute those changes to a new instructional philosophy adopted by the school, rather than to the advent of the new standards and tests.

Why is the degree of change limited in this way? Two possible explanations emerge. First, standards (the focal point of most schools' efforts thus far) alone do not require schools to go deeper. Our findings illustrate that schools can make some initial changes to their curriculum and instruction, plus their testing environment and incentives for students, and see some dramatic gains in student achievement on the WASL. By focusing their efforts on the standards and tests, they can see improvements in a very short period of time. Given the number of competing priorities that high schools must juggle, however, it is likely that many schools will turn their attention to other issues as the spotlight turns away from the current task at hand (i.e. to raise student achievement on the WASL). Without new incentives and accountability (i.e. from teacher to teacher, student to teacher, school to state) to close the much more significant gaps in student achievement that exist, these schools may be tempted to call initial efforts, "the best we can do" and move on to the next challenge before them.

The second reason for the limited impact on schools thus far is one of capacity. On the one hand, many schools in our sample, improving and comparison alike, acknowledge that they do not have the knowledge or skills that they need to address the problems of motivating unmotivated students, engaging reluctant teachers, or providing accelerated learning opportunities that work for students who are far behind their peers. This is not necessarily because good ideas on how to address these problems do not exist,[24] but more likely because some schools are less connected to the experts (including other schools) who can share those good ideas. As one principal put it:

> *Aren't we pretty stupid? We are all isolated. We are all little islands out here all trying to do our own thing.*

On the other hand, some schools have interesting ideas about what to do but feel that they do not have adequate time or resources to make deeper changes. This may be a problem without a simple solution, however. Some of these schools already have schedules that allow teachers to work together across grade levels and subject areas, suggesting that the challenge of getting more and more teachers to adopt dramatically different ways of thinking about students and knowledge, and practices that reflect those new understandings, will require more than just additional time. It will also require new mechanisms for encouraging, supporting or requiring teachers to alter their usual ways of working.

A few schools in our sample appear to be pursuing more dramatic approaches to increasing student achievement based on "best practices" identified by researchers and schools across the country. In addition to focusing on the new standards and tests, these schools have re-organized themselves to create new opportunities for students and

teachers to explore challenging material in engaging ways. Among improving schools, those that did so made slightly greater gains than other improving schools. While it is too early and our sample size is too small to confirm whether these schools' approaches made the difference, our findings suggest that high schools will need to do more to achieve significant gains in student achievement than most schools currently envision.

Thus, while new state standards and tests present an important opportunity to realize lasting improvements in high schools, and some schools are already taking important steps to make that happen, significant challenges remain before all schools can ensure that all students have the best possible chance to reach considerably higher levels of achievement. Our findings raise important questions about the capacity of some schools to leverage adult and student efforts to improve, even with the new state standards as their guide.

These challenges, however, should not diminish the relatively positive news that our findings suggest. They should rather been seen as a call to action for anyone interested in making significant and lasting improvements in student learning. As schools attempt to move forward with their plans, they will need help from state and local leaders to stay the course of increasing student learning and making standards meaningful for all students. In the next section we outline some suggestions for how state and local actors can help.

Section II:

Recommendations, How State and Local Actors Can Help

If lessons hold from other states' experiences with standards-based reform, high schools in Washington State are working against the clock. As the stakes are raised, significant doubts from parents, teachers, students, community leaders and legislators may slow or halt the process.[25] While this may not come to pass in Washington State, it does create a sense of urgency for making schools' efforts count.

In this environment of pressure and uncertainty, state and local actors can help high schools focus their efforts and press for meaningful increases in student achievement. They can:

Make state and local accountability plans clear

While most improving high schools moved forward in spite of uncertainties about the future, many schools in our sample acknowledge that they will benefit when state accountability plans are made clear. Principals stress that uncertainty about the future feeds some teachers' doubts about the inevitability of the Certificate of Mastery and the need for making deeper changes to curriculum, instruction, organization and relationships with students. Once accountability measures are known and a timeline is set, some schools may be able to break out of the holding pattern that currently limits their efforts.

In the absence of clear information, some principals and teacher fear that the state will take a punitive approach, rather than one that supports struggling students and schools to improve. To some state and local actors, this may seem ironic given the details of the accountability proposals recently considered by the House and Senate. Nevertheless, our conversations with schools reveal that some teachers and principals have little sense of ownership for those plans and significant questions about the intentions of the people trying to craft them. By contrast, many feel committed to the Essential Academic Learning Requirements because they and their peers helped create them. One way to increase the level of commitment to using WASL data to hold schools accountable may be to increase the level of involvement of teachers and principals in the determination of just how that will take place. Another may be to mount a more comprehensive campaign to share the details of future proposals with principals and teachers who are less in touch with the legislative process.

Provide schools with incentives and resources to seek out and implement new ways to close learning gaps

Accountability measures present an important chance for state and local actors to focus schools' efforts on making changes at the "core of the educational experience" rather than simply trying to raise students' test scores. To realize this opportunity, however, schools need help finding new ways of working. Some schools have a long way to go before even half of their students pass all four sections of the WASL. Working within the existing context of their schools, many school leaders struggle to find strategies that result in the kind of dramatic gains in students' learning that will be necessary. Given extra incentives and opportunities to re-engineer their programs and relationships with students, some of these schools may find a more successful path. Our conversations with principals suggest that engaging teachers in analyzing data and learning new ways of teaching are essential first steps to overcoming resistance to the standards and

tests, and to increasing schools ' abilities to meet the needs of all students.

But analyzing data alone will not ensure teachers will change their ways of working. State and local actors can help focus teachers' efforts by creating incentives to seek out, test, and evaluate new ideas for closing the gaps in student learning. This might be accomplished, for example, by offering start-up grants to schools that develop comprehensive, research-based strategies for improving student learning at their schools. The experiences of schools that recently received grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates' Foundation may provide important lessons on how to reap results from such an approach. Another approach may be to fund and support networks of teachers and principals who meet to analyze current research on promising strategies for addressing challenges at their schools.

Finally, our findings raise questions about the capacity of some schools to take advantage of opportunities to improve, even after several years of experience with the new standards-based system. State and local actors can help the students in these schools in part by giving capable school leaders the discretion and support they need to compose an extraordinarily capable and committed team of teachers and staff who will undertake well-designed and coordinated efforts to improve student learning.

Ask schools for evidence of student learning beyond WASL scores

Several schools acknowledge that they do not feel an urgency to change what they are doing, in part because their communities are pleased with their efforts thus far. Local actors, in particular, can help increase schools' commitment to close the gaps in student achievement by asking for evidence of student learning. As an example, one school mentioned that when local businesses begin to ask students applying for jobs for documentation of their WASL results, they anticipate students will take the challenge of meeting state benchmarks more seriously.

Public oversight of high schools ' efforts to improve student learning requires more information, however, than WASL scores alone. For one, the late reporting of WASL scores impedes the kind of urgent expectation for change that would be possible if schools and communities received more immediate feedback on student learning. Furthermore, conversations between schools and the public about "school accountability" will be much richer and more accurate when local and state actors ask and receive answers to questions such as: What kinds of students are successful at this school and why? How has this school added to these students' understanding of the world and of themselves? What is getting in the way of this school making more of a difference in the lives of some students? What can be done to remedy that situation? By looking beyond test scores for other meaningful information about what knowledge and skills students are gaining, as well as how schools are helping them to do so, local actors can help increase schools ' common commitment to ensure higher levels of student achievement. Some schools are moving in this direction already. For instance, they are actively engaging community members as judges in the evaluation of students ' "culminating exhibitions" and thereby giving those who participate a firsthand understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of students and the school.

Give students credit for improvement over time, as well as absolute WASL scores

One of the biggest concerns of principals is that students who are hard-working but far behind their peers will be "penalized" by the Certificate of Mastery or other accountability measures. These students, in particular those learning English as a second language, may have the will to succeed but simply run out of time before they have to take the WASL. Our findings, however, clearly confirm that many students respond to concrete incentives such as a promise of additional course credits, or extra credit applied to a class grade. To find the balance between encouraging less motivated students while not penalizing hard-working students who have farther to go before they will pass the WASL, state and local actors can give students credit (both literal credit toward graduation and praise) for their progress over time, as well as their absolute WASL scores. This may help convince some students to stay engaged, in spite of the fact that they have a great distance to go.

Help narrow the gaps in student achievement prior to students' arrival in high school

Many principals agree that making standards work will require a K-12 effort. They believe that students will arrive more prepared to succeed in high school as they are exposed to standards-based curriculum and instruction in elementary and middle schools. Some school leaders note, however, that closing the gaps in student learning will require schools at the lower levels to offer struggling students something more than just "more of the same." Local and state leaders can help high schools by supporting elementary and middle schools to implement strategies that will accelerate students' learning prior to their arrival in high school. By narrowing the gaps, high schools may be more able to do their part to bring students' knowledge and skills to a level necessary to earn a Certificate of Mastery.

State and local leaders can also help by increasing the level of communication and cooperation between schools at different levels. Right now, many schools are counting on the fact that students' experiences will be more coherent as the standards-based system evolves. This assumption rests on the idea that efforts at the elementary, middle and high school levels will complement each other. To ensure this is the case, school leaders and teachers need time and incentives to work together to coordinate their efforts on the behalf of students.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that standards-based reform can have a positive and lasting impact on high schools in Washington State, but that much work remains to be done.

On the one hand, our interviews, surveys and site visits confirm that most high schools in our sample are trying to respond to the new state expectations for student learning and the WASL. They are aware of the need to increase student achievement and of the state's plans to hold them accountable in some way.

Furthermore, the strategies and experiences of the improving schools in our sample offer some valuable insight into how some high schools are beginning to address the significant challenges they face in raising student achievement. Improving schools:

- Pick a strategy for raising student achievement and stick to it.
- Embrace the new state expectations and WASL as positive tools for bringing about change.
- Make new expectations for students count by building them into the existing structure of grades and course credits.
- Get in touch with individual students' interests and needs by creating smaller learning communities and tapping into students' opinions about their schools.
- Take responsibility for gaps in student learning by pressing teachers to examine shortcomings in student achievement and keeping up the pressure to improve, even when their districts and communities seem satisfied with their efforts.

Improving high schools demonstrate that attention to the task of meeting the new state expectations for students can pay off. These findings are very consistent with previous studies on elementary and middle schools. High schools face different challenges, however, and have to respond in unique ways to make standards meaningful. They have to contend more directly with the challenges of motivating students, leveraging teachers' efforts, and finding ways to address the significant gaps in student learning. Furthermore, they have to do this in the context of uncertainty about the Certificate of Mastery and the state's accountability plan.

On the other hand, our findings are also disquieting.

While improving schools took some important steps to increase student motivation to take the WASL seriously and to leverage teachers' commitment to change, it is unclear whether most schools will be able to move beyond their initial efforts to improve. Some schools acknowledge that they will struggle to reach a portion of students, those who are deeply disconnected from school or face serious social and personal issues, even when the stakes for failing to do so are increased. Others note that they do not have the time or resources they need to develop new ways to close the significant gaps in learning that some students bring to school. Finally, some teachers and principals wonder whether it will be worth the effort to make any great changes to what they are doing, as they doubt that parents, community leaders and legislators will ever agree to "high stakes" accountability measures.

Research on large-scale reform indicates that these efforts typically fail to affect more than a superficial level of change in most schools. Without new incentives to press schools to fundamentally improve upon their current

understandings and practices, the likelihood of deeper changes occurring is unlikely. As it stands, many schools anticipate that the Certificate of Mastery will create at least one new incentive to change. But many also acknowledge that the high stakes alone will not assure that teachers will adopt new ways of working, that students will feel more motivated to learn, or that all schools will change for the better.

Our findings confirm clearly that the task at hand is monumental, and will require collective effort to change the "core of schooling."[26] State and local actors can help high schools by pressing for increases in students' achievement on the WASL, while also offering incentives and resources that help schools affect deeper changes in the way teachers teach, students learn, and high schools work.

Appendix A : Research Methods

School selection

Using data on all high schools in Washington State, we calculated a factor score for each school based on several school-level and community-level variables. In addition to the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch in 1998 and 1999, we included the percent of non-white students in each school in 1999; the percent of children under 17 under the poverty line in the school district in 1997; and the mean education level of adults over 24 in the school district in 1997. We did so to address concern that high school students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch may not apply for a variety of reasons, thus making the rates a less accurate reflection of family income than they are in the elementary and middle grades. Schools were then categorized as low, average or high socio-economic status (SES) according to the following rule:

High SES = Factor score is +1 standard deviations above mean SES score for all schools
Average SES = Factor score within +/- 1 standard deviations of mean for all schools
Low SES = Factor score is -1 standard deviations below mean for all schools

Hits: We assigned a school up to six "hits." A hit was possible if:

1. The school was in the upper quartile of change in reading scale scores, independent of SES.
2. The school was in the upper quartile of change in math scale scores, independent of SES.
3. The school was +1 standard deviations above the mean for change in the reading scale score for schools in the same SES group.
4. The school was +1 standard deviations above the mean for change in the math scale score for schools in the same SES group.
5. The school was +1 standard deviation above the mean for change in the percent meeting standards in reading for schools in the same SES group.
6. The school was +1 standard deviation above the mean for change in the percent meeting standards in math for schools in the same SES group.

We selected our sample of improving schools from those that received five or six hits. To ensure a sample that reflected the diverse environments in the state, we also considered geographic location and urban/suburban/rural setting. We then identified 16 comparison schools from among those schools that had no hits. We selected comparison schools that were in the same district or region as the improving schools, and that served similar populations of students (based on free and reduced lunch rates and racial/ethnic make-up of the schools).

Thirty-nine of the forty-six schools (84.8%) invited to participate in the study did so. Four improving and three comparison schools declined to participate. Of the 39 principals that completed telephone interviews, 37 also completed a lengthy written survey. The following chart offers a profile of our sample of schools based on data collected from the state and from our written survey.

Table 2.

Profile of sample schools

	Sample Average	Sample Range	Improving Average	Comparison Average
Enrollment 1999	1033	365-2543	1014	1072
% students receiving free or reduced lunch	24.06	3.5-85	24.13	23.92
Student Demographics				
% Asian	5.44	0.2-25.1	4.75	6.82
%American Indian	2.62	0-19.5	2.54	2.77
%Black	2.41	0-24.9	1.93	3.35
%Hispanic	10.01	0.6-70.8	10.56	8.92
%White	79.39	12.3-97.4	80.13	77.92
% students receiving ESL services	3.68	0.01-15.9	4.03	3.12
% students receiving special education services	10.6	6.0-18.0	10.62	10.59
% students taking AP courses	8.25	0-50.0	5.46	12.54
% teachers with greater than a Bachelors degree	55.02	33.3-85.2	55.57	53.9
% teachers new to the school in past three years	5.75	0-17.9	6.16	4.92
% average daily attendance	93.0	86-98	93.2	92.5

Scale scores

A scale score is the numeric score earned by an individual student on each test of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). A student 's work is categorized as "meeting standard" if his/her scale score meets or exceeds a cut-off score set by the state for each test. The scale score offers two important advantages when calculating schools ' improvement in WASL scores. First, the average scale score of a school reflects changes in performance of all students, whether or not they met the standard for each test given. By contrast, the change in percentage of students meeting standard in reading does not tell us if a large proportion of low-skilled students made strong gains, but did not quite reach the cut-off score required to "meet standard." Second, the scale score is a more meaningful reflection of change in performance in high schools because of the large number of students in a limited number of high schools who refused to take the test in the first year of testing.

Effect scores

To illustrate the overall impact of improving versus comparison schools on students ' scale scores, we calculated an "effect score" for each group of schools. Effect scores are calculated as the difference in average scale score in a school from one year to the next, divided by the standard deviation in scale scores pooled across all schools. The resulting average of all effect scores is zero with a standard deviation of one. By standardizing the change in scores in this way, all scores are calculated using a common measure: the standard deviation for all average school scores in the first year of testing. Using this metric, the change from one year to the next in the scale scores in the improving schools was 1.21 standard deviations for reading and 1.41 standard deviations for math. By comparison, the change in math and reading scale scores in the comparison schools was almost non-existent, no matter how high or low they started in 1999. In most educational research, an effect size of .80 is considered large [27]. Thus, effect scores of 1.21 and 1.41 are significant indeed.

Appendix B : Interview & Survey Protocols

Principal Telephone Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your school and the kinds of students you serve.

2. How would you describe the ideal graduate of your school?

3. Would you say your school has a strategy for increasing student learning? What is it?

4. When your school's WASL scores came out last year, what was your reaction?
   a. Why do you think the students' scores changed as they did?
   b. How did teachers respond to the scores?
   c. What are their ideas about why the scores changed as they did?

5. Is the school focusing specifically on raising its WASL scores? How so?
   a. Did you or teachers at your school try to increase your rate of participation? (If yes) How?
   b. Did you change the way you administered the test?
   c. Did you adopt any new curricula as a result of the WASL?
   d. Any new teaching methods as a result of the WASL?
   e. Did teachers focus on any particular skills as a result of the WASL?
   f. Which classes did your efforts include?
   g. Which grade levels were involved (either in your school or in a feeder school)?
   h. Are you focusing on the Certificate of Mastery? How?

6. What was the impetus for the various changes we have discussed thus far?
   a. Did your teachers or you feel pressure from parents? From the district? From the state? Other? Do you feel the pressure on your staff to improve test scores is healthy/not healthy? Too much/just about right/too little?
   b. What, if anything, has your district asked your school to do differently as a result of the new standards and tests?

7. What are teachers' perceptions of the WASL?
   a. Do they support the WASL as a measure of student achievement?
   b. Are they comfortable with tying their curriculum to the new academic standards and to findings from the test results?
   c. Do you feel they have the skills they need to help students meet the new standards?
   d. How do they feel about the Certificate of Mastery?

8. What are students' perceptions of the WASL?
   a. Do they understand its purpose and consequences?
   b. Do they take the results seriously?
   c. Do they see it as a valid way to measure their learning?
   d. How much do they know about the Certificate of Mastery? How do they feel about it?

9. When you think about raising student achievement, what factors most help your school in that effort? What, if anything, gets in the way of your raising student achievement even more?

10. As you look to the future, are there any concerns that you have about the WASL, the CoM, or your school's ability to help all students reach the state benchmarks?

11. If you could change one thing that you think would help your school's ability to improve student learning, what would it be?

12. What advice would you have for other schools about how to increase student achievement?

Written Survey for Principals[28]

I. SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

1. What grades does your school serve?

2. How many days of instruction are there in the regular academic year for a student at your school?

3. How long is the school day for students in the 10th grade (including instructional and non-instructional time)?
4. What is the average class size of ENGLISH courses for high school students in your school?

5. What percentage of the high school student body in your school currently receives the following special services?
    a. Bilingual education
    b. English as a Second Language
    c. Special Education
    d. Honors Courses
    e. Advanced Placement courses
    f. International Baccalaureate
    g. Free and Reduced Price Lunch

6. Are admissions criteria used to determine which students attend your school? IF YES, please briefly describe your admissions practices. (Please indicate whether admissions criteria apply to some or all students.)

7. Currently what percentage of high school classes are taught in each of the following areas by a teacher with an undergraduate major, or minor or graduate degree specialization, in the subject area taught?
    a. Mathematics
    b. English

8. Does your school pair new teachers with experienced teachers in a mentoring program?

9. Does your school have specific graduation requirements that are different from the state mandated course requirements? If YES, what are those requirements?

10. Does your school have a school wide homework policy in which all students are requested to do a certain number of hours of homework? If YES, please briefly describe your school wide homework policy?

11. Does your school offer any work-based learning activities for students that are coordinated with local employers?

12. Does your school have a mentoring or advising program where each student is matched with a teacher with whom he or she meets frequently (individually or in small groups) to discuss current problems and future plans?

13. Please indicate the percentage of students enrolled in this school who are tardy on a typical school day.

14. What is your student mobility rate? Please briefly explain how your mobility rate is calculated.

The following questions deal with the '98-99 and '99-00 school year.

15. As of October 1, 1999 (or the closest date for which information is available), what was the total student enrollment in your school?

16. What was the average daily attendance rate for students in your school during the 1999-2000 school year?

17. How many teachers worked in your school in the 1999-2000 school year? (If your school includes grades below 9, please count only those who teach in grades 9-12).

18. What percent of your full time teachers was NEW to the school in the 1999-2000 school year?
    a. New teachers as % of all teachers
    b. New ENGLISH teachers
    c. New MATH teachers

19. What percent of your 1999-2000 full time teachers has a degree beyond the bachelor's degree?

20. What percentage of your 1999-2000 10th grade class transferred into your school after the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year? (Please estimate.)

21. During the 1999-2000 school year, what percentage of students in your school were the following groups?
    a. Asian or Pacific Islander
    b. American Indian or Alaskan Native
    c. Black
    d. Hispanic
    e. White

22. Please indicate the percentage of your Year 2000 graduating seniors who completed the following courses during high school.
    a. Calculus
    b. Third year foreign language
    c. Physics (with lab)

23. In comparison to classes in the past, was the 10th grade class of 2000:

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24. From SEPTEMBER 1998 to APRIL 2000, did your school...

[CIRCLE ONE ON EACH LINE]	Yes	No	If Yes, please briefly describe
a. Experience major growth or decline in student population?	1	2	
b. Add or drop a grade level?	1	2	
c. Increase or decrease more than one classroom section in one or more grade levels?	1	2	
d. Significantly increase or decrease the average class size for [GRADE]?	1	2	
e. Enroll a significant number of students from a different neighborhood than before?	1	2	
f. Add a new program (e.g. gifted, arts, charter) that would draw a different group of students than before?	1	2	
g. Grow or decline in number of teachers?	1	2	
h. Experience higher teacher turnover than in recent years?	1	2	
i. Add teachers with specific skills or training that are new to the school?	1	2	
j. Change teacher/student groupings such as assigning the same group of students to one teacher for multiple years or grouping teachers into smaller teams serving one group of students?	1	2	
k. Change principals?	1	2	

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25. Between SEPTEMBER 1998 and APRIL 2000, did your school:

	(CIRCLE ONE)		
	Yes	**No**	**If Yes, please briefly describe (eg name, amount, purpose)**
a. Join or lure a school assistance organization, eg Coalition of Essential Schools, Success for All, New American Schools Design Team?	1	2	
b. Receive a grant or other monetary help from a foundation or business?	1	2	
c. Receive non monetary help or assistance from a foundation or business?	1	2	
d. Receive extra funding from the district compared to prior years?	1	2	
e. Receive other special help or assistance from the school district?	1	2	
f. Bring in a new tutoring program?	1	2	
g. Receive special help from parents or the PTA?	1	2	

26. Are there any other major changes that occurred at your school between September 1998 and April 2000 that we have not touched on so far?

If YES, what were those changes?

II. SCHOOL CULTURE

27. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your school. We appreciate your frank responses.

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28. Giving your best estimate, about how many teachers in this school

	Almost none	A few	About half	Most	Almost all	Don't know
a. help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their own classrooms?	1	2	3	4	5	0
b. take responsibility for supervising the school?	1	2	3	4	5	0
c. feel responsible for helping students develop self-control?	1	2	3	4	5	0
d. feel responsible when students in this school fail?	1	2	3	4	5	0
e. feel that the WASL is a valid measure of student learning?	1	2	3	4	5	0
f. share successful lesson plans and projects with other teachers?	1	2	3	4	5	0
g. make a conscious effort to coordinate their teaching with what happens at other grade levels?	1	2	3	4	5	0
h. use student data (test scores, work portfolios) to shape their teaching plans and methods	1	2	3	4	5	0
i. take an interest in students outside the classroom	1	2	3	4	5	0

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29. Please indicate the extent to which each of the following is currently a problem in your school.

	Not a problem	Minor Problem	Moderate Problem	Serious Problem
a. Insufficient classroom space	1	2	3	4
b. Condition of the physical plant	1	2	3	4
c. Students eating class	1	2	3	4
d. Physical conflicts among students	1	2	3	4
e. Vandalism of school property	1	2	3	4
f. Student disrespect for teachers	1	2	3	4
g. Racial tension	1	2	3	4
h. Motivating students to do well on the WASL	1	2	3	4
i. Motivating teachers to improve their teaching practices	1	2	3	4
j. Finding qualified teachers to fill vacant posts	1	2	3	4
k. Finding time as principal to observe teachers in their classrooms	1	2	3	4
l. Finding common ground as a school staff	1	2	3	4
m. Accessing quality resources to improve teachers' skills	1	2	3	4
n. Balancing school priorities with district expectations and demands	1	2	3	4

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30. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4
•	1	2	3	4

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31. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. I feel pressure from the district to make sure students achieve the 10th grade benchmarks	1	2	3	4
b. As a principal, I let teachers decide how to teach their students without interference from me	1	2	3	4
c. Changes in district rules, policies or programs make it difficult for us to stick with a school improvement plan	1	2	3	4
d. Students arrive at our school prepared for the academic challenges of high school	1	2	3	4
e. We have difficulty targeting resources to activities we believe will improve student learning	1	2	3	4
f. This school offers a challenging curriculum to all its students	1	2	3	4
g. Students take the WASL and Certificate of Initial Mastery seriously	1	2	3	4
h. We communicate with middle/junior high schools about the students we will be receiving each year	1	2	3	4
i. I believe the WASL is a valid measure of our students' learning	1	2	3	4
j. Teachers in this school are constantly learning and seeking new ideas	1	2	3	4
k. Teachers in this school really care about their students	1	2	3	4
l. People in this community make efforts to help this school	1	2	3	4
m. Our school day maximizes instructional time	1	2	3	4
n. We make special efforts to ensure students take the WASL	1	2	3	4

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III. WASL AND CERTIFICATE OF MASTERY

32. Please indicate the extent to which your school is doing the following activities specifically in the hopes of raising students' WASL scores?

	Never	Once a year	Several times a year	Several times a month	Daily
a. Reviewing the new standards and tests as a staff	1	2	3	4	5
b. Talking with parents about the new standards and tests	1	2	3	4	5
c. Training teachers on how to best prepare students for the WASL	1	2	3	4	5
d. Asking students to complete problems or exercises that will familiarize them with the WASL format	1	2	3	4	5
e. Reviewing the school's curriculum for comparability with the standards and tests	1	2	3	4	5
f. Training parents on how they can help their children prepare for the WASL	1	2	3	4	5
g. Using pay raises, parties, or other incentives to raise student awareness and preparation for the WASL	1	2	3	4	5
h. Other	1	2	3	4	5

IV. FINAL THOUGHTS

33. In your opinion, what are the two most important things your school is doing to increase student learning?
34. What are the two biggest challenges you face in increasing student learning?

V. ABOUT YOU

35. Please indicate your current position at the school.
36. If PRINCIPAL/HEAD TEACHER, how many total years of experience do you have:

    a. As a principal or head teacher
    b. As principal/head teacher at this school

37. IF TEACHER, VICE PRINCIPAL OR OTHER, how many total years of experience do you have at this school?

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Appendix C : Steps Taken By Most Schools To Respond To New State Expectations

Though many schools' strategies went beyond, our surveys and interviews suggest that most schools, improving and comparison alike, took some common initial steps in their efforts to increase student learning and respond to the new state expectations. The steps that virtually all schools took were:

1) Expose students to "WASL-like" activities. 95% of schools report that they ask students to complete "WASL-like" activities several times a year. These assignments intend to press students to problem-solve and explain their thinking, while simultaneously familiarizing students with the kinds of challenges they will face on the WASL.

2) Rearrange their testing schedule and environment. Most schools experimented with different approaches to the administration of the WASL itself, trying to find a testing environment that works best for students and the school. Schools reported a variety of arrangements, most of which included testing in a quiet, serious environment under the supervision of teachers who know students personally.

3) Review their curriculum to identify 'who is teaching what and when.' Nearly every school in our sample reported that they have reviewed the state standards as a staff and have looked at their own curriculum to make sure it is organized to best prepare students to meet standards. 57% of schools report that they continue to review their curriculum several time a month, usually as a part of their department or grade level meetings.

4) Focus school-wide efforts on improving reading and writing. Virtually all schools have identified reading and/or writing as areas for school-wide improvement, and many have targeted professional development resources like the Better Schools Fund to provide training for teachers in those areas. In particular, many schools trained teachers in "Reading Across the Curriculum" and "Six-Traits Writing."

The depth of the changes that schools made to their curriculum and instructional programs varied widely. Some schools reported that they made few changes because they were confident that their current approaches would pay off in higher test scores in the long run. Others spent the good part of two years analyzing what changes they would need to make in order to ensure students would be exposed to the material tested on the WASL. In general, principals and teachers report that where changes to instruction have occurred, they have been focused primarily on asking students to do more writing and problem-solving in their assignments and tests, and giving students feedback based on WASL-like criteria (e.g. the six-traits of writing or the way students explain their work in math). The schools that report more fundamental changes in instruction (e.g. more team-teaching, more inter-disciplinary learning opportunities, more hands-on learning experiences) attribute those changes first to a new instructional philosophy and second to the advent of the state standards and tests.

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endnotes:

1. The Certificate of Mastery will include those tests that are deemed reliable and valid by the State Board of Education. For more information on the Certificate of Mastery and other graduation requirements, see: http://www.k12.wa.us/SBE/gradreq/NWGRQ.pdf

2. Shaw, Linda. "Bill to Aid Failing Schools Blocked." The Seattle Times, May 25, 2001.

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6. See Hill, Foster and Gendler, 1990; Lee, et al. 1999, Newmann et al., 2001.

7. See Cotton, 2001; Mayer, 2000.

8. See Hess, 2000; Hill, et al., 1990.

9. Johnson, Jean and Steve Farkas. Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools. New York: Public Agenda, 1997.

10. Scale scores are the numeric score given to each student's work on each WASL. A student's performance is deemed to "meet standard" when his/her scale score meets or exceeds a cut off score set by the state for each academic test. See Appendix A for more information about school selection.

11. To illustrate the overall impact of improving versus comparison schools on students' scale scores, we calculated an "effect score" for each group of schools. Effect scores are calculated as the difference in average scale score in a school from one year to the next, divided by the standard deviation in scale scores pooled across all schools. The resulting average of all effect scores is zero with a standard deviation of one. By standardizing the change in scores in this way, all scores are calculated using a common measure: the standard deviation for all average school scores in the first year of testing. See Appendix A for more information about our school selection methods.

12. See Appendix A for interview and survey questions.

13. See Appendix A.

14. Lake, Robin J., Paul T. Hill, Lauren O'Toole and Mary Beth Celio. Making Standards Work: Active Voices, Focused Learning. UW/Partnership for Learning: Center on Reinventing Public Education, February 1999.

15. Johnson and Farkas, 1997.

16. We use the term "best practices" to describe the strategies pursued by a small group of schools in our sample. While the strategies represented in this term are quite varied, these schools are differentiated from most schools in our sample by their pursuit of a school-wide improvement strategy that reflects the available research on "effective schools" and student achievement, rather than focusing primarily on the new state standards and tests as their targets for change. Some schools focused on increasing the rate of advanced course taking among students; others re-organized themselves and supported teachers to team teach an integrated, project-based curriculum; still others focused their efforts on

creating rigorous 'school-to-work' learning opportunities for students. We recognize that this label is awkward, however, in that it attempts to pool a set of divergent philosophies and strategies under one umbrella. Furthermore, we note that the evidence of the impact on student achievement of each approach varies. Nevertheless, we find that these schools share a common belief that if they pursue their research-based approach fully, they will realize long-term gains in student achievement on the WASL and other measures.

17. See Appendix A for more information about effect scores.

18. See Appendix C for more information about the most common steps that schools took to respond to the new state standards and tests.

19. Johnson and Farkas, 1997.

20. See Lake, et al., 1999 and 2000.

21. Elmore, Richard F. "Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice." Harvard-Educational-Review; v66 n1, Spr. 1996.

22. Ibid., 1996.

23. See Hess, G. Alfred. Accountability in Chicago. Paper presented at the annual conference of The Brookings Institution, May 2001. In this report, Hess presents findings from a study of Chicago's efforts to raise student achievement between 1990 and 2000. The author contends that while the proportion of high school students scoring at or above national norms in reading and math on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills rose, the change could be attributed almost entirely to an increase in scores among incoming 9th graders. Hess therefore suggests that while some high schools engaged in promising reform efforts over the ten-year period, the gains in high school student achievement were the result of elementary and middle level improvements rather than changes in high schools.

24. Elmore, 1996.

25. See Education Week: Quality Counts, 2001 for more information about other states' experiences with standards-based reform.

26. Elmore, 1996.

27. Glass, G. V., McGraw, B., & Smith, M. L.: Meta-analysis in social research. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981.

28. Our survey design drew substantially from the model created by U.S. News and World Report's "America's Outstanding High Schools Study," conducted in 1998-99 by the National Opinion Research Center. See Hoffer, 1999 for more information about that study.